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BURIED DIAMONDS

VOL. III.

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1886 BURIED DIAMONDS

BY

SARAH TYTLER

AUTHOR OF 'SAINT MUNGO'S CITY' 'CITOYENNE JACQUELINE' ETC.



IN THREE VOLUMES VOL. III.

Mondon

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BURIED DIAMONDS

CHAPTER I.

THE BLOW FALLS.

'Don't be alarmed,' enjoined Mat Crabtree for the second time, an impossible piece of advice, considering the hour of his call, his aspect, his head turned to listen for the approaching footsteps of still more untimely visitors on the heels of the first. 'I was coming to tell you that there has been an unaccountable egregious mistake somewhere. It will all be rectified presently.' His voice stopped suddenly upon the entrance of the pretty prim housemaid. She was a more formal creature even than a footman, and

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would have died before she had lost her mannerly composure—a great part of her stock-in-trade. Yet she betrayed plainly enough, behind her shocked decorum, that she was, as she would have said, 'struck all of a heap.'

She announced, 'Two gentlemen wishing to speak to Mr. Prior and Mr. John. Shall I show them in here or up to the drawing-room?' Her mincing, slightly quavering voice was drowned by a piercing shriek from Susie, who was sitting bolt upright panting for breath. 'Don't let them come near me,' she cried wildly. 'It is not true. What has Lamb said?'

Jack said not a word. His jaw fell a little; a lack-lustre look came into his eyes as he leaned against the window-frame so heavily that his mother in her bewilderment and consternation put her hand upon his arm to draw him back. 'Take care, you will be through the glass,' she warned him.

John Prior looked up like a man dazed.

'Eh! What is it, Crabtree? What ails Susie? Who else does the girl say has come before breakfast is well over?'

The visitors answered in person. They had taken the liberty, conceiving it part of their duty, to follow on the servant's steps, while Susie's shriek had further accelerated their progress. Two respectable enough looking men of their class, in plain clothes, but with an official air, men perfectly well known in Newton, stepped forward. 'We are very sorry, Mr. Prior, but we have no choice,' said the spokesman, like a man accustomed to bear down opposition—not harshly, but as a matter of simple necessity. 'We have business here this morning. These are the warrants.' He took out two papers and offered them for inspection. 'We have come over to arrest, at the instance of the crown, Susan Prior or Crabtree, wife of Lambert Crabtree, of Crabtree's Bank—this here young lady,' and he

looked up to put in the parenthesis, 'and John Prior, younger, of Redcot, that young gentleman there,' he added another explanatory note to all concerned, 'on the charge of having wickedly and feloniously, on the night of the nineteenth or the morning of the twentieth of June, broken open the safe of Crabtree's Bank, Newton, and stolen from it the sum of seven thousand pounds in Bank of England notes, together with a parcel of South American bonds of the value of six thousand pounds.' He ended by the usual caution to his prisoners against making any statement, whether of innocence or guilt, which might be used against them on their trial.

There was a second's dead silence, in which one might have heard a pin fall. Susie all convulsed a moment before, sat motionless, as if she were stiffening into stone. Jack did not stir. The next instant the spell was broken by a jarring discord. Tommy rushed barking upon the scene. Instead of the unearthly

stillness there arose a maddening, senseless clamour, for Tommy's example was followed in the form of crying by the two younger children. They wanted no further provocation to express their ignorant alarm in a style in keeping with their tender years. If the officers of justice plainly heard the intolerable din, and were seriously disturbed by it in the discharge of their duty, not another grown-up person was distinctly conscious of the hideous noise, though Mrs. Prior made a mechanical motion with her hand, which signified 'Down, Tommy; be quiet, good old dog.' Just as instinctively and unconsciously Bennet Gray caught up Sam Wood's and Piers Crabtree's crumpled-together fingers in her own, clasping them in sign of restraint and encouragement.

'It is an outrageous blunder, as I said,' gasped Mat Crabtree, his voice half choked; 'the best plan to clear up the error without delay will be for you, Susie, and you, Jack,

to go at once along with the officers and me to Newton.'

'Of course we'll go,' declared Susie, in a melodious but highly-pitched voice which startled everybody afresh. She was sitting up, smoothing her hair with both hands, in her flushed beauty and natural grace, perfectly recovered from her recent distress, apparently mistress of the situation. 'I was taken by surprise, and nearly frightened out of my wits,' she apologised suavely. 'You know I don't believe my nerves ever will recover from the effects of that atrocious robbery. But when one comes to think of it, was there ever anything so ridiculous heard as proposing to arrest me and Jack for the theft? Why don't you laugh, Jack? Of course we'll go, and have the joke out with the magistrate. But won't pa-pa here do? He is a Justice of the Peace. No! Well, it will be greater fun to go to Newton; I was just about to startyou all remember? And then Lamb will

share the fun. But first, my good men, have you had any refreshment after your journey?' and Susie turned to the officers of justice who had arrested her, with a movement of the most gracious consideration. 'Mam-ma, will you bid cook see to it, while I am getting ready and the phaeton is brought out?'

Susie took away what breath was left in the assembled party. The very policemen gaped like the children, glanced inquiringly at each other, and at the rest of the audience, and forgot their good-breeding more than Camilla the housemaid had forgotten hers by grinning in a sickly, imbecile fashion.

John Prior had crushed the newspaper he had been holding, let it drop, and risen to his feet, and was staring about him with a working face. 'The lawyers must be stark-staring mad,' he muttered. 'Accuse Susie of robbing the bank, a woman, a gentlewoman, the banker her husband, and her brother mentioned as her accomplice—it is more than preposterous.'

Then he suddenly faced round with bent brows on his son.

'What have you to say to it, Jack? You can surely say something,' with rising irritation.

'I can't,' answered Jack, with so great an effort that it sounded like a groan, bending brows which were marvellously like those of his questioner.

An indignant voice spoke up for him. 'The accusation is so unutterably absurd, it is not worth replying to.'

It was not Mrs. Prior or Jane who said these words. Mrs. Prior, indeed, had not given way; she was very pale, but she stood erect, with eyes which saw all that passed and ears that heard every word; and she stepped forward between her husband and son as if to put a hand on each. But Jane clung to her mother as she had not clung since she was a little child. It was Bennet Gray who spoke with impatient scorn, which

changed to abashed mortification before the words were well out of her mouth. She had no acknowledged right to speak there. How could she stand up and defend him before his father and mother, friends and strangers, when their relations—hers and Jack's—had neither been openly proclaimed by him nor rightly recognised by others? Even at this moment—after one glance that seemed to appeal to her passionately—he turned away from her.

There was no farther outcry, Susie's bearing and Jack's silence forbade it. It would have been equivalent to admitting a belief in the sister and brother's guilt. It would have been unworthy of the family themselves, as well as an insult to Susie and Jack, to resent and resist the action of the law, however eccentric, and to reproach or execrate the men who were there to do their duty. Susie was certainly hurrying her departure. In place of getting up any obstacle or betray-

ing the least reluctance, she was continuing to remind everyone that she had been on the point of starting for the Bank House. She was calling for aid to collect her various properties and to see her off. She was slightly staggered on being told that she was to go with her brother and the policemen in a cab, which they had brought from Newton, instead of being driven over in the phaeton by Jack, as she had proposed, while her luggage should follow her. As for her brother-in-law, it was only by the courtesy of the officers that he was to be permitted to accompany them.

But Mrs. Lambert Crabtree insisted, against every prohibition and remonstrance, that she would take her children with her. According to Susie, she could not now be parted from darling little Mollie and Piers even for a few hours, though she had often before left them for twice as many weeks. What were the speakers thinking of? They did not know a mother's feelings. The idea was not to

be entertained for a second that she was to leave her blessed babies behind her, even in the care of their grandmamma, and Aunt Jane, and Miss Gray—who was so obliging in hearing the children say their lessons along with Molly and Piers's cousins. It was not altogether nice to take the little ones home in a common cab. She was afraid their papa would not like it; but she was not aware that there had been any fever patients driven to the infirmary lately, and she would run the risk rather than be separated an hour longer than she could help from her pets. Susie had her way at this moment, as usual. The children were suffered to accompany her, room being made for them with some difficulty by the bigger of the policemen going on the box with the driver.

The preparing and starting Mollie and Piers increased the confusion, as well as threw a slightly different air over the party—so that,

if Susie had these ends also in view, she attained them likewise.

Jane and Miss Gray, instead of the servants, waited upon Susie and the children. Jane's hands shook, while Susie's were steady, and Bennet was dumb before the excited chatter which the little Crabtrees struck up in the prospect of the journey.

Mr. Prior had gone aside with Mat Crabtree, Mrs. Prior had one moment which she could call her own with her son. 'What is it, my boy?' she asked him piteously. 'Of course, it is all a stupid blunder; but why do you take it in this way? Why are you not able to make a jest of it, as Susie does? What is it, Jack?'

'I can't tell you, mother,' answered Jack, with a restless gesture, and at the same time with an expression as if he was weary of the whole matter with utter weariness. 'Ask Susie, if you like; I have nothing to tell.'

John Prior scarcely appeared to follow the

arguments of his friend urging him to stay where he was at Redcot, pledging himself-Mat Crabtree—to see Susie and Jack through this amazing farce of a trouble, undertaking to find bail (which might be asked as a form), swearing that, if offered, bail would be accepted. Mat tried farther to explain how so unnatural a charge had been brought. The stolen bank notes had been found secreted in the Bank House. The dishonest servant who had most probably done the deed had not yet been detected. It was incumbent on the police and detectives to do something. By venturing on a ruse like this—however transparent the ruse—they might succeed in throwing the real culprits off their guard, and so let the law get on their track.

Jack mechanically kissed his mother and sister and wrung Bennet's hand, but without looking in her face. He was going away silent and gloomy, as if he was the actual depredator.

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Susie, on the contrary, was as lavish in reassuring smiles as in tender caresses. 'Oh, how we'll laugh at it all some day,' she cried. 'What a story it will be to tell, that I was taken up—actually taken up—for robbing my husband's bank! Poor little me a burglar! It is a subject for *Punch*,' and she held up her small hands. 'How on earth did I do it? On the night of the volunteer ball, too, of all nights, when I was so tired and sleepy. Molly and Piers, your mam-ma is a heroine labouring under a grotesquely grim accusation, or else she is a virago or a ghoul, for anything you know or she herself can tell.' When her foot was on the step of the cab she turned lightly and ran back into the hall, to give a last direction about her trunks. Her father was standing half-way down the stair; she went up to him swiftly, passed an arm round his neck and kissed him again. 'Cheer up, papa darling. It is a horrid bore, but it is all a wild nightmare, an insane delusion.'

'Was it so?' John Prior asked himself, as the cab rolled off, and the servants who had been hiding away for very shame on the family's account came stealing into sight. Had Susie kissed him just under that grisly daub of Judas Iscariot betraying his Master, which the squire of Redcot had well nigh forgotten these many years? Whom did that strange, haggard face—wan—but with a hectic glow like a splash of blood on the pallid cheeks, resemble? Was it Susie or was it Jack?

CHAPTER II.

THE PILLARS OF THE FALLING HOUSE— AN INTERVIEW.

Happily not one among many thousands of the myriads of families in which men and women are set in this world, are fated to experience such a shock—such a moral earthquake as was undergone at Redcot on the morning on which Susie Crabtree and Jack Prior were arrested there. How do the tragically exceptional innocent people to whom such shocks come behave on these unique occasions? Is it a fact that there is a limit to our capacity for pain—that when a mother and her child, or brothers and sisters, grown up men and women, perish together in a fire or by the upsetting of a boat,

the surviving members of the families—the husband and father who is at once a widower and childless, the parents bereft of sons and daughters by a single blow—are stunned as well as stricken, and rendered for a time at least mercifully incapable of realising the extent of their misfortune? Do they mourn, but with not more bitter and excessive grief than a sensitive man or woman might have felt for the loss of one human creature who was dear?

This may be true in a family shipwreck such as had befallen the Priors, the nature of which, to people of honourable antecedents, who have led honest and well-regulated lives, is as incredible as it is rare. Susie and Jack were gone under trying circumstances, but these were so astounding that it was impossible fully to realise them till an interval had passed.

There was much more loud lamentation in the kitchen than in the drawing-room—and in the former region a sense of mournful enjoyment soon entered into the proceedings, as into

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a funeral feast, when the funeral is not one in which the guest is nearly concerned. The sombre satisfaction in this instance had the agreeable addition of a strong spice of excitement. Miss Susie that was, and Mr. Jack charged with robbing a bank between them, perhaps lodged in Newton Jail by that time, was dreadful, but it was also thrilling.

Upstairs, the family, and the woman who had tacitly become a member of it for the moment, looked at each other in blank wonder and consternation. What did it mean? What grain of truth, of probability at least, had led to such an undreamt-of catastrophe?

John Prior pulled himself together and walked heavily to his study, to lock himself in and take counsel with himself, to bury his head in his hands, and ask himself—was this the retribution which Lambert Crabtree had threatened? How had it been brought about? Could he—John Prior—have prevented it at one time by a word of his mouth, which, if

spoken now, if shouted in the market-place, would be wholly in vain. Jack and Susie branded for life, proclaimed common thieves! Perhaps they had been drawn into some weak compromise, which constituted them partners in the guilt of a far greater sinner. He, their father, could not, for the life of him, in spite of his long apprenticeship to spleen and gloom, conceive that the girl and boy—they were still girl and boy to him-had committed a barefaced, vulgar crime, as gross an intellectual blunder as it was a heinous moral offence. Why, it was so egregious an error, by the simplest reasoning, as to argue a lack of reason amounting to fatuous imbecility or hair-brained insanity in the man or woman of the rank of the Priors who fell into the delusion. What were the inducements which could lead to such a mania? Susie's husband's difficulties, Jack's scrapes and debts—supposing he had contracted more. These might be alleged in a court of law, but they were totally inadequate.

In the drawing-room Bennet Gray roused herself in time to stop Ally from asking with round-eyed speculation and great glibness in leaping at a conclusion, whether Aunt Susie and Uncle Jack had been traitors or highwaymen, as Aunt Susie had seemed to say, and whether the gentlemen who had come for them were going to take them to the Tower? But surely nobody would think of cutting off Aunt Susie's head with its fringe. Uncle Jack would not let them, he would fight for both. Miss Gray took the children to their nurse, to learn more prosaic annals of arrests from her gossip with her fellow-servants than were to be drawn from a child's history of England.

When Bennet went back to the women's sanctuary, she found Mrs. Prior sitting patiently in her usual place, surrounded by her books and the materials for her work, though she was doing nothing unless seeking to recover herself.

Jane was more restless. She was moving here and there, coming always back to her mother's side and appealing to her. 'Mother, what can be the cause of this affronting outrage? Mother, what is to be done?'

'My dear, your father will see to it. Mr. Crabtree has gone in with the others, he will do all that is necessary. No doubt everything will be cleared up presently.'

It was the strangest, most pathetic thing to hear Jane—so self-reliant in her own line—so tempted to undervalue what was apart from it —and so accustomed to regard her mother as good and dear, but as long left behind in the march of mind, thus turning and looking up to the elder woman's broader human experience and deeper knowledge of life in the hour of trial. It was equally strange and pathetic, in the order of nature, which is older and wiser in its instincts than any acquired knowledge, to see how Mrs. Prior bore herself. She had been content to bide her time, would have been more than content to bide it for ever, rather than have shared in such an awakening. But

now she instantly resumed her place as one of the heads of the house, one of the bearers of its burdens, and showed herself ready, strong in her wifely and motherly instincts, for whatever demand might be made on her.

There was another woman who rose to meet trouble when it came to those dear to her with the marvellous courage and self-forgetfulness which are instincts with the higher natures among the sex. These qualities contest so successfully with feminine weakness as to render women stronger than men on certain occasions, not only 'ministering angels' but rulers born for adversity.

Bennet left the mother and daughter together, and went boldly to Mr. Prior's study door, where she knocked for admittance.

There was a muttered protest within, a slow, reluctant tread to the door, which was unlocked, and the applicant had to stand for a moment the stare of utter astonishment and displeasure cast on the intruder. In the days of her full

favour with Mrs. Prior and Jane, Bennet had never made much more way with the master of the house than was implied in being tolerated by him, and regarded, almost against his will, with a man's—a clever man's—instinctive admiration for a beautiful and quick-witted woman.

'May I speak with you, Mr. Prior?' petitioned Bennet quickly, as an excuse for her being there.

'Well, Miss Gray, I should have thought that it would be tolerably plain to you I am engaged this morning,' he protested, with almost vehement sarcasm. 'This is not a time for unnecessary discussion.' Then he thought better of it, and held the door for her to pass in. 'Perhaps you are right,' he corrected himself formally, with a latent bitterness in the concession. 'It is better to act without delay when it can be done. It is out of the question for you to remain here, under the circumstances, a moment longer than you can help. I acknowledge that, after what has happened, it might be as much as your reputation is worth, and might be fatal to your prospects as a teacher. I am perfectly sensible of all that can be said on the subject, so that no apology is needed. No doubt my grandchildren will miss your valuable instruction, but the loss cannot be helped, unfortunately. Any inconvenience caused by your going so suddenly will be temporary, and is not worth mentioning when graver matters have to be considered,' he said, with a sardonic smile that was well-nigh ghastly on his face at that moment. 'Allow me to write you a cheque for the quarter's salary. Ah! I forgot, my cheque-book is on Crabtree's Bank; but there is money in the house—Jack brought a supply.' He stopped abruptly; Jack's name had been too much for him.

'Oh! no, no, Mr. Prior; that is not what I meant,' cried out Bennet, who had been too much abashed and distressed to interrupt him before. The ordeal would have been severe

under much more favourable conditions, and it required all her firmness and devotion to another to face it. 'I want no money. I am not going away—unless, indeed, you send me. I am not here as a schoolmistress. I knew your son before I came. Oh! don't you understand? You have been young yourself.'

'I can guess that there has been some wretched love affair,' admitted Mr. Prior sternly, and that you have probably considered yourself engaged in marriage to my son.'

Bennet bowed her head, which was hanging low enough already.

'So you came beforehand to spy the land. I shall not make any further comment than that it was ingenious of you,' he said, with a sneer.

'It was very wrong—I see that now,' she said, with straightforward simplicity and with more composure, as she made the confession, 'but you will not choose this moment to punish me. Your son is innocent of my coming here;

he knew nothing of it. You will forgive me, and let me share this extraordinary calamity and insult with the rest of the family.'

' Miss Gray, you are foolish and romantic, as well as scheming—excuse me, but I cannot avoid saying it. However, I am not your judge or my son's. I can only make some things clear to you which I must conclude you do not rightly comprehend. I am not the prosperous man you may have imagined me to be when you received Jack's unwarrantable addresses. I am poor; I was on the verge of ruin before the event of the morning. Good God, do you know what it all means?' He started up and began to pace the room, unable to restrain himself. 'The miserable lad with whom you have entangled yourself and his sister are lying under a criminal charge. Their family must bear the consequences of their misfortune or their misdoing; in this there is no choice. But the best thing that you can do for yourself—and you have ample reason for doing it—is to break off an engagement which ought never to have been formed, and cut the whole connection.'

'Never!' exclaimed Bennet, indignantly raising her comely head high enough now. 'What, give up Jack! Jack, who sought me for myself alone, because he is unjustly charged with a crime of which, you must be well aware, he is no more capable than you or I, or an innocent baby! Desert my friends—though you refuse to own me as a friend—when they are in trouble! What do you take me for, Mr. Prior? Oh! it is not I, it is you who do not understand. And I have more to tell you, sir. You seem to think I coveted your supposed wealth and position, when I listened to your son. The truth is I would not listen to him till he consented to go to one of the colonies and seek to make a home for us both there, where I might have worked with and for him, without degrading him and me in his people's eyes. I declined to become either a suppliant for their bounty or a dependant upon it. Then, during

his absence, I succeeded to my cousin's fortune; for I am not poor, like most schoolmistresses, I am rich; I am fit to marry a squire's son, if money was the only consideration.'

'What! more deception and manœuvring, Miss Gray,' was Mr. Prior's sole cutting rejoinder.

'Yes, manœuvring, if you will have it,' she said desperately. 'I wished to learn for myself the real character of Jack's friends and of his relations with them. I was vain enough to imagine that I might help to make peace. It was silly and arrogant, and I see that I have offended you and Mrs. Prior beyond hope of forgiveness. Still I meant no harm. But never mind me. There are so many much more important things to be thought of now, and I am sure no time should be lost. Mr. Prior, for your son's sake, forgive me, and let me help you,' implored Bennet, looking up into John Prior's face with wistful, beseeching eyes.

'And do you think I could accept help,

whatever you mean by the term, from a girl like you?' he fretted and fumed in his pride and sorrow. 'I am more bound than ever to protect you as far as I can from the evil consequences of your association with any member of my family. I should hope I have some conscience left me. Apart from that, I should have to answer to your relations and guardians for availing myself of your mad generosity.'

'I have no relations and few friends,' she told him simply, 'none to whom I am accountable, or who will not be satisfied with any explanation I may give them. I was a very lonely woman when your son met and sought and won me, till death and beyond death, whatever you may say or do. My fortune was left to me unconditionally. I am of age; I can do with it what I will. I would give it to Jack this moment if he were here, and would take it. I desire nothing better than to spend any portion of it, or all of it, on his

behalf. When I think of it you cannot prevent me, but it would be wiser and more becoming if we were to act in concert, and do what is necessary for him together. Indeed, I do not wish to make myself conspicuous, to come forward in a way that would vex and mortify anybody. I would much rather that I was not heard of at all in the matter. I only ask a small thing as a great favour—that you will make use of my money for Jack's benefit.'

'The proposal is perfectly preposterous; it cannot be entertained for a second,' persisted John Prior, doggedly. 'I am not come to such a pass as that implies. I still have means to defend my son. I can meet the legal expenses to which I suppose you refer. And even if my resources failed there are others to whom I could apply without having recourse to a stranger, a girl who comes badly enough off in the business as it is.'

'Oh, surely not a stranger.' She objected to the harshly-sounding word, and protested against it hotly. 'And not a girl who is not accountable for what she does with her eyes open, and with the full consent of her judgment no less than her heart. The father of a daughter like Jane Prior ought not to deny women brains and moral responsibility. Dear Mr. Prior, listen to reason. I have thought it all out within the last hour. I could not help it—so please don't blame me for pre-

He shook his head impatiently, and turned from her, but she followed him.

suming to interfere in your affairs.'

'I know Jack got money from the bank,' for you before it failed, but a considerable sum was to be sent to the manager at Kershaw to provide for the men's wages. You made the arrangement in my hearing last night. Mr. Crabtree of Haybridge is as much interested in the case as you are, and I know you can

depend upon him as an old friend; but it is his brother's bank which has stopped payment, and no doubt he banked there also. Besides, there is Mrs. Lambert Crabtree to be thought of in addition to her brother.'

Still he stood immovable. She put her hand upon his arm in her urgent pleading.

'Do let me be your banker for the time, just till you can look about and form your plans, if you prefer it so. Let me consult some of the great lawyers who were my cousin Josh's fellows and friends. They offered to help me on his death. If I ask them, their knowledge and experience will be at your service—at Jack's service—do you hear, sir? You cannot deprive your son of any advantage at this pass though the accusation seems so preposterous that it ought to be dismissed without a question. You will not break my heart by continuing to decline to let me do what I can to help him. I will do it—

whether you refuse or accept my assistance; but I put it to you whether there should be discord between us at such a time, between Jack's father and the woman who, if he and she live, will be Jack's wife.'

CHAPTER III.

A COMPROMISE.

He yielded at last, but rather worn out by her importunity than sensibly touched by what he had called her mad generosity. He was too sore in spirit all over, too torn in different directions, to be capable of being gracious. Yet he was not without an underlying feeling of dull surprise and secret satisfaction—altogether passive to begin with, in the discovery that Jack, his son, with all his defects and faults, had made a woman like the one before John Prior—a woman rich in attractions and gifts—love the young man desperately, infatuatedly, so that she was ready to give up everything for his sake.

And it was with old-world politeness and fairness, however coldly and with a suspicion of irony still not stamped out of him, that John Prior chose to accompany his future daughter-in-law back to the family circle, and to take that, the first, opportunity of introducing her to its members in a new character. 'I wish to let you know,' he said, speaking to Mrs. Prior and Jane, 'that Miss Gray has done me the honour to acquaint me with an earlier engagement between her and Jack, and with her determination to stand by it and him. In justice to myself, I cannot say that I approve of her resolution, though, in consideration for him, I am driven to acquiesce in it. I have also to tell you that it is not Miss Gray, the children's teacher, but an unsuspected heiress whom we have been entertaining unawares, who has been masquerading among us, that I present to you. So much the worse for her. It may be the better for Jack, in a pecuniary sense, if he ever get out of the mess he has

contrived to fall into, but I cannot suppose that it will raise the world's estimate of his honour and disinterestedness, whatever he or she may have to say to it.'

The women who served as an audience to the extraordinary speech had been so thunderstruck and overwhelmed this morning already that they could not rise on the instant to fresh experiences of marvelling and strong feeling, whether of approval or disapproval. Their very intellects were stupefied, and the pair listened languidly, with a mystified, scared look, as if, on the one hand, they could not take in the tale, and, on the other, they feared for John Prior's wits. At last a gleam of joy, like a passing sunbeam piercing dark clouds, shot across Jane Prior's open face. She rose and went up to Bennet and clasped and kissed her in acceptance of her as a sister. 'You are really to be one of us,' she said, with little gasps after coherence; 'you are not shrinking from us after what has happened to-day. You

are cleaving to poor Jack, though I knew you were too good for him already, before we were aware you were rich, except in what is far better than money. I am glad, for all our sakes.'

But Mrs. Prior did no more than agree with a chilling submission to her husband's and her son's will. 'If you have given your consent, John,' she said, with a glance at her husband, but without a look for poor trembling, shrinking Bennet, who appeared, in truth, as if she were the humble petitioner for mercy, and not the flattered, looked-up to dispenser of bounties, 'of course, mine goes with it. That needs no commentary, and is of little consequence.'

Later, when Mrs Prior seemed to awake to Bennet Gray's unaccounted-for possession of worldly goods, the sole effect on an exceedingly unworldly woman was somehow to induce her to make a speech which struck the girl's wounded ears like cruel mockery. She (Mrs.

Prior) was afraid she had unwittingly failed in the consideration to which Miss Gray was probably accustomed—that she might think the family at Redcot ought to have shown her. She might have missed something in her accommodation which she had a right to regard as her due.

This to Bennet, who was if possible hardier and simpler than Jane in her habits, who would have been willing at no distant date to have kissed the ground that the elder woman trod, who would have accepted gratefully the poorest quarters that Mrs. Prior had awarded to her!

It was evident that Mrs. Prior resented the entrance of the new member into the family at this low ebb of their fortunes quite as much, possibly more, than if the Priors had been in the hey-day of their prosperity. No constancy or loyalty on Bennet's part, no benefits she could confer, reconciled the mistress of the house to the promotion to a daughter's place

there of a woman who had dwelt beneath its roof for many months under false colours. was by no means the fact of Bennet's having been what Lambert Crabtree had defined as 'a hired servant' that stuck so fast in Mrs. Prior's throat; she could have swallowed that objection faster than most squires' wives would have swallowed it. It was, as Mrs. Prior believed honestly, the deceit with which she had been treated, the treachery which had been going on so long under her unsuspecting eyes, that she could not pardon. So the wife and mother revolted at the distinction which was thenceforth to be Bennet's portion, that could not be entirely disguised. The very servants remarked on it, though they knew no more than that Miss Gray was the trusted and confidential governess and friend of the family which she had been for some time. But it puzzled them a little to find her come so much to the front in this disastrous crisis. It appeared as if nothing could be done without 40

her. She strove to keep herself in the background; nobody could accuse her of selfassertion or arrogance. Nevertheless, it was not to be concealed that she took an active part in the measures which Mr. Prior was rousing himself to adopt in the circumstances. More than once Miss Gray was summoned to Mr. Prior's study to join with him and Miss Jane in a consultation from which Mrs. Prior for some reason held herself aloof. But the mistress of the house had so slipped into the position of a spectator rather than an actor in the affairs of the family, not to say a controller of them, that her passiveness on this occasion was by comparison scarcely noticed. If one person perceived Mrs. Prior's withdrawal with remorse and shame, she dared not call attention to the anomaly, or try to obviate it, any more than she could take it upon her to show her former friend the letters which Miss Gray was writing on John Prior's behalf, and carrying to him for inspection. But it was hard for Mrs.

Prior to brook Miss Gray's coming forward as Jack's chief help and stay in the day of his adversity, to feel that his mother was superseded even here in her most sacred privilege.

Mat Crabtree was again able to send much needed consolation to Redcot. In the course of the afternoon he could write, if not that the case had been instantly dismissed, at least that bail had been accepted both for Susie and Jack. The sister and brother were at liberty, and had gone to the Bank House, where it was considered advisable that Jack should remain with the Crabtrees for the present. It would be more convenient if they had to go through the form of getting up a defence.

There was a good deal of reading between the lines of the note which Mat Crabtree had carefully refrained from putting down in black and white. He omitted any admission of the seriousness of the case. He suppressed the difficulties that had to be surmounted before bail was received. He did not record the

points that were stretched in deference to the social position of the accused—above all to Susie's delicate beauty and feminine charm. She had hurried in from Redcot with the children she could not bear to leave behind her; she was relying on her husband, who had returned just in time, and was lending her his support in her painful position. How was it possible for any magistrate with a heart in his bosom, to look unmoved at that confiding, clinging creature in her refined grace and innocent unconsciousness of the danger and disgrace of the situation? Whatever the burden of proof against her, he could not tear her from her home and family and send her to a common prison. It would be as much as her life was worth. It would be executing her sentence upon her before she was judged, and that long after capital punishment had been abolished for robbery without manslaughter.

Neither did Mat Crabtree see it necessary to state that, apart from any convenience in Jack Prior's staying on at the Bank House, he had himself elected to remain there. He had gone so far as absolutely to refuse to return to his father's house under the present circumstances.

There was yet another detail of the morning's work which the writer neglected to supply, though it had struck him forcibly at the time. When he had driven into Newton in such humiliation as his worst nightmare had never suggested, in the middle of his dismay and confusion, while he had hardly dared to raise his honest eyes and confront his numerous acquaintances, he had been impressed by finding them nowhere. All Newton was palpitating and quaking with the news, but it looked like a town deserted by its inhabitants. In the first blush of the catastrophe there was a natural recoil from witnessing its result. The same people who might to-morrow run to crowd and stare at the ugly spectacle of human collapse and degradation drew back and kept

out of sight to-day. Not a face was visible at a window, not a head was thrust out of a shop door. A few foot-passengers and drivers of carts and carriages in the streets made as if they did not see anything unusual going on. The lamentable downfall of the Priors and Crabtrees was not beheld, to begin with, by a triumphant populace.

'Call no man happy till he die,' said the wise man. In a like spirit, 'call no day wretched till the day close.' The night before, Bennet had bemoaned an ignominious ending to a marked day in her life, which she had rashly chronicled beforehand with a white stone. In her ignorance she had railed at the past evening, and counted it the most intolerable she should ever have to know. Yet, matched with the woful day which had followed, she was inclined to look back on the moment of Jack's betrayal of their engagement, and call its vexation—poignant as it was at the time, sweet and not bitter, full of compensations

—lit up with hope in the future, having no real appalling burden of misfortune on the point of falling and crushing every bright prospect.

Bennet believed she only got through the long summer day of Jack's arrest by the excitement of her appeal to his father, and the bustle of work into which she plunged for his deliverance.

Night came at last bringing the merciful shrouding darkness and oblivion which is at once so welcome and so terrible to the wretched, because with light consciousness must return.

John Prior had been in the habit of reading family prayers from the date of his marriage and of his becoming the responsible head of a household. As ten o'clock struck he came mechanically into the drawing-room and sat down in his customary chair, but, when the bell was about to be rung to summon the servants, he put out his hand to arrest the summons. 'I cannot, Susan,' he said hoarsely

to his wife, 'I cannot to-night or to-morrow either, after what happened this morning. It is not fit. I would not face the very maids if I could help it, and this must seem mockery to them.'

But Mrs. Prior rose up, all herself again for the moment, came round from her corner to his side, and pled with him.

'If we have asked God's protection and forgiveness all these years, John, shall we fail to seek them now, when we want them more than ever? Shall we fling back His past mercies and present pity in the face of our Maker? We have done nothing that we need fear to look in the faces of our fellow-creatures. They know that as well as we do, and will not misjudge us or forget that we have led honest, friendly lives among them. Let them see you be the man you've always been; show that you trust them, and that you trust God still, with your unhappy children as well as with yourself. I ask it as a favour of you, John Prior,

and I have not asked any personal favour for a long time. Jane will bring the books before the servants come and look up the places, so that the ordeal may be short. If you like I'll read the chapter and psalms, as I did when your eyes were ailing—don't you remember?'

He remembered what an effort it had cost the shy woman to control herself and summon courage to assume, even so far, the office of the family priest to the household in days gone by. But now her tongue did not falter, and her thin cheek was neither dyed with a blush nor robbed of every vestige of colour, as she sat by his side in the midst of those who had seen the manner in which her son and daughter had been taken from her that morning. Thus some drops of the dew of Heaven were distilled and dropped in soothing balm to quiet the strife of tongues and soothe the fever of anguish in these poor tortured hearts.

CHAPTER IV.

AN EMBASSY.

DAYS, even weeks, passed, until a sort of gruesome familiarity grew up in the minds of people interested and uninterested in an event so improbable, disgraceful, and unspeakably miserable as the charge against Mrs. Lambert Crabtree and her brother.

It began to be a matter of course, as if it had been a conclusion always to be anticipated, that Susie Crabtree and her brother had been accused of robbing Crabtree's Bank, had been arrested, were out on bail, and must stand their trial at the Assize held at a country town which, fortunately, was not Newton, but Crowminster, several miles further from Redcot.

The whole incredible, wretched story seemed to ring in Bennet Gray's ears from morning to night till every syllable was lodged in her memory and riveted there, and her entire mind was usurped so that she could think of nothing else, as when life or death in a sickroom engrosses the faculties of the watchers. Remonstrances from without, of which there were some, though there could not be many, touched her but slightly. One of the late Josh Grav's friends, a light of the law whom she had consulted, took the trouble to write and deliver a strong opinion upon the late great practitioner's cousin and heiress mixing herself up with people who could get into such grave trouble as had befallen the Priors. But he received so unqualified an answer for his pains that he decided the young lady had a mind of her own, and must be left to waste poor Josh Gray's money as she chose. Mary Burton left her school for a day, and brought her father with her, for additional weight to

bear on her friend; and Bennet kissed and shook hands and thanked them, but was as stone to the faintest hint of giving up a lover in such a plight as Jack Prior's.

Mat Crabtree, who had been fully enlightened throughout their acquaintance with regard to Miss Gray's possessions, when he was told of the line of conduct she was pursuing, discussed it apart with John Prior, who had been overborne by her into taking her at her word. Mat induced the squire of Redcot to make a fresh stand, backed by a responsible ally, and to remonstrate anew on the sacrifice she was bent on making. Mat Crabtree explained elaborately how money could be raised as he himself was raising it, without having recourse to a young lady who at that moment was totally unconnected with the Priors either by blood or marriage.

But Miss Gray resisted the two men, either of them old enough to be her father, as stoutly as if they had been her contemporaries. 'I can surely do what I like with my own. What is it to anyone else how I dispose of my money? I have often mourned over being an orphan without near relatives, but I have thought there was one small compensation—I was my own mistress,' she protested, almost angrily. 'Why do you force me to tell you over again that I promised myself to Jack when I was poor, and that, as I will never go back from my word, whatever he may do or say, he is the next thing to my husband in my eyes? If you will not accept my help I shall engage counsel on my own responsibility, and let the world think what it chooses.'

Bennet had imagined Jack Prior owning and claiming her before his friends; but, as it turned out, it was she who had to own and claim Jack, and she did not flinch from the obligation. She stood the brunt of every attack on her unmoved. Not only was she unlike Susie Crabtree in not being given to cast her burden on another, and to cling to whoever

would bear the imposition, Bennet was not even upheld by Jack. He went on steadily, refusing to come out to Redcot, where Susie would have had no objection to reappear if she had got any encouragement. Jack only wrote one letter in return for the score of letters Bennet Gray sent him, not caring—at least not caring sufficiently to cause her to let her pen lie idle for twentyfour hours—that she had no answer save that single note. He told her so briefly in the page and a half she could only guess at the mortal misery with which the words were scrawled, that their engagement, with all their happy hopes and plans for the future, was at an end. A man charged with a bank robbery, and bound to undergo a trial, whether he were found guilty or not, was not a fit husband for her or any innocent girl of spotless reputation and honourable antecedents, even though she had been as penniless as he had thought her. She was to have nothing more to say to him. He believed it would have been a happy

riddance, even if all this had not happened; an ugly, stupid, idle cub, who had been 'no good' to anybody connected with him. She would be infinitely better without him, if she could only see it, and he hoped she would be happy, and said with his whole heart, God bless her for all she had wished to be to him. But he could not hear of the connection lasting a day longer; he would be a selfish brute to think of it.

On the other hand, ever since she had known him, when Jack had fallen over head and ears in love with her on the first day of their acquaintance, Bennet had felt in some occult fashion accountable for the lad, bound to look after him, take care of him, and cherish him. It was from no want of manliness in him. Manliness was one of Jack's most conspicuous characteristics; and in place of being backward, he had been rather too forward and sanguine in urging his suit when he had nothing, independent of his father, to offer the woman

he sought for his wife. It was the peculiar tie which unites certain natures, the form which love takes in the hearts of some women, and those among the noblest of their sex. Bennet's young lover was her natural charge, as well as her natural protector. He was, as coming events cast their shadows before, her lord and master; he was at the same time nearly as much her boy as he was his mother's.

Bennet's command of the means to carry on the contest had earned for her, without claim on her part, the right to be consulted. Besides, her quick intelligence and fearless spirit would have qualified her to come forward in any difficulty. She had learned all there was to know, and had been taken into masculine confidences from which the other women in tenderness for them had been excluded. Yet Mrs. Prior could have shared the knowledge with Bennet and not have given way, but only grown more full of resource the greater the demand on her powers—only Mrs. Prior had elected that there

should be no alliance between her and her future daughter-in-law. The consciousness of the severed friendship, which had been so sore at first, had ceased almost to be felt by Bennet. For how could she pause to dwell on any minor grievance when her heart was full to bursting of Jack and his piteous strait?

Bennet had been forced to apprehend the seriousness of the outlook, not only that the presumptive evidence was next to damning against Susie before so startling and prejudicial a step as the arrest of a woman in her position was risked by competent authorities, but that there were many unlucky coincidences in apparent corroboration of Jack Prior's participation in his sister's guilt which might compromise him fatally. His too opportune arrival at Newton the night before the volunteer ball and the robbery. His failing to repair at once to Redcot, which would only have been natural after a long absence, instead of staying on with his sister, yet with a kind of secret consciousness,

neither showing himself in the town nor appearing at the ball, but lying in wait, as it were, till his services were called for. His anxiety to get away before the baffled attempt at robbing the bank had been discovered; so that he started next morning without so much as waiting for breakfast. Above all, his dogged silence in declining to make any statement which would throw light on the matter, all were so many suspicious circumstances which the accused man's counsel, however skilful and eminent in his profession, would find it hard to get rid of.

There was one little glimmer of comfort which came to Bennet in her tribulation; not only was Jane free from envy of the supremacy to which her fellow-student had attained, and inclined to be sisterly with a greater longing for sympathy on her own account than the girl had ever before experienced; but just as a spiritual door had closed between Bennet and Mrs. Prior, so a mode of communication was

opened, and grew wider day by day, between Miss Gray and John Prior. The young woman, the heritage of whose age and character it was that she could not despair and would not doubt, who was devoted to her purpose unhesitatingly and unsparingly, gained with every hour upon the beaten, disappointed man. Her nature worked upon his, till she restored to some extent his tottering belief in his son. At least Jack could not be base when she vouched for his truth. Her unshaken conviction of his worth went far to prove him worthy in a fashion. Bennet shed tears of joy in her night of sorrow when she found out for herself that John Prior had been to Newton, and been at the Bank House, where he had asked Jack to accompany him to the post-office and the railway station—a request which Jack, taken unawares and suspecting nothing, had granted. The result was that the father and son had been seen together in the most public places in the town, and that one of the

disastrous exaggerated allegations likely to be brought against the young man—namely, that he was an incorrigible scapegrace, at open war with his father—must be materially weakened by this contradictory evidence.

Bennet did not know whether the incident reached Mrs. Prior, and whether she set it down also to the debtor and creditor account she had established between herself and the woman whom her son loved, and who loved him. Mrs. Prior might look upon it as a fresh wrong done to that other woman who had loved him longer, asking nothing again; as one more instance in which she, the wife and mother, had been defrauded even of her wifely voice, her influence with the father on behalf of the son.

Withal, Mrs. Prior had risen up to meet adversity as best she could. She had been quiet and self-restrained. For some time previously the reins of domestic government had been held slackly in her hands. The old

house, with old Martha the cook, old Richard the coachman, the old gardener, and the vounger servants under them, had very much kept itself. It was different now, when a stormy blast had shaken the establishment to its foundations, upset routine and rules, and let loose the elements of disorder, well-nigh of anarchy. However faithful the staff of servants, they could not be expected to sustain the ordeal unmoved. But Mrs. Prior gathered up the reins, superintended each department as in her younger, more active years, saw that all was ordered rightly as it had been heretofore, and provided carefully for the comfort of each member of the community, including her natural enemy, Miss Gray. When the domestic machinery worked once more like clock-work, a sense of stability returned to the house, which had been, as it were, rocking wildly. Men and women went back to their several duties—dinner was not three minutes too late, the plate was cleaned, the horses were groomed

with the accustomed regularity. A fulness of confidence succeeded to the sense of unsteadiness when Mrs. Prior was heard talking to Tommy, checking an uncanny disposition to howl which the old dog, as he detected something wrong, with canine acuteness, had manifested lately to the superstitious horror of the servants' hall. The mistress of the family was even seen to sit down in her own corner and put a few stitches into one of her quilts —a proceeding which had an excellent effect. The little Woods ceased to stray over the house and gather such husks of gossip as the children could pick up. They began to play again at their old familiar games, to attend to their rabbits and pigeons, to confine the children's chatter to their own small concerns. The grown-up people commenced to believe it possible not only that the sky would not fall and the world would go on as it used to do, but that the clouds might pass away from Redcot, the sun shine out once more as

it had shone a year—a month ago, and everything be as it had been formerly.

Mrs. Prior contributed her quota, and that not a small one, in stemming the tide, which might have prevailed till it accomplished the demolition of the family framework.

John Prior forbade his wife and daughter to enter Newton. Mrs. Prior complied conditionally. She would respect her husband's wishes unless—she did not say what misadventure or what epoch was to limit her obedience. Jane shrank of her own accord from the expedition. She could bear to see Jack, but not Susie. Her unprincipled extravagance had much to do with all the misery. Jane did not dare to say more even to her own heart.

It had come to this, then, that Bennet Gray, acting on her own idea and on a hint from Jack Prior's counsel, volunteered her services, and accepted a commission from Mr. Prior to go to Newton, see both Susie and Jack, and gather what she could of the truth from them.

If John Prior had to give up his daughter, there was no help for it—at least he might take refuge in the knowledge that she was a married woman, and that, if she had committed a crime, it must have been at the instigation of a reprobate of a husband, who had exposed her to the danger of which he was to have reaped the fruits. But John Prior could not suffer his son to be the victim of his sister's treachery. Whatever the father had thought of the son in the past, it was John Prior's part to come to Jack's rescue now; it was all the more and not the less his part because of the alienation which had existed between the two. Jack's cause was his father's cause, and that of the woman who would go through fire and water for her lover, who loved him even as the woman who had borne him loved him. The lad was not forsaken.

There was no objection to Bennet Gray's going to Newton. She would not be openly shamed in the deed. As Mat Crabtree had

said, there was as yet no confessed connection of blood or marriage between her and any Prior or Crabtree. Her position in the Redcot family, which was all the public knew of her, would render it not at all out of the way that she should go as a messenger between Redcot and the Bank House.

Bennet had almost forgotten during these heavily-cumbered days whether the season was summer or winter. When she went up to her room for her hat and jacket, she recognised, almost with wonder, that the noisette roses were still drooping in great white clusters, like sculptured flowers, on a railing opposite. The shiver which, when she had leisure to feel it, was always running through her veins now, must be in the blood and not in the air. As she came down stairs she saw Jane by the hall table tying string round some little parcels. One of them contained a few of Susie's superfluities, a pet fan, a favourite scent bottle, a hood to wear when she indulged in a nap, which their owner had left behind her at Redcot and was clamouring to have sent to her. With another unusual instance of recollection and consideration in trifles, showing how Jane was waking up from her mental absorption, she had also put up some of cook's cakes, and the little Woods' books and toys for Molly and Piers Crabtree. Jane explained—'Their uncle says they are very much left to themselves, poor children, while Susie will not let them be taken out of the turmoil to run about in peace either here or at Haybridge. What I have sent may help to amuse them. You will not mind looking after the parcels, will you, Miss Gray?'

Jane refrained from the use of Bennet's Christian name, not because of any reluctance to take the privilege of their future relationship with her friend, but because of that habitual obliviousness and lack of glibness which made Jane in her wisdom so devoid of tact and practical cleverness, compared to Susie in her

folly. Even under the circumstances, Bennet could not refrain from a suspicion that Jane Prior had probably let her stumbling choice fall on the most indigestible of cook's dainties and the most unentertaining of the Woods' books and toys-those 'Conversations on the Telescope' and that miniature globe, Jane's own gifts originally, which were supposed to combine instruction and amusement. Molly and Piers might snatch these loans out of each other's hands, come to blows over the temporary novelties, tear or break them, but would not otherwise honour them with juvenile patronage. However, the amiable intention was everything.

'Of course, I'll not mind,' said Bennet. 'Is there anything else I can do?'

Yes, there were two small baskets—one of summer pears, the other of mushrooms—also standing on the hall table, but Jane knew nothing of them. She would hardly have proposed the last as a free gift to the little

Crabtrees. Perhaps the baskets were on the table by accident, and it was not meant that Miss Gray should take them in the phaeton with her.

Mrs. Prior arrived on the scene in time to account for the baskets.

'May I trouble you?' she said formally yet simply enough; 'Susie is very fond of mushrooms, which none of the rest care for. She used always to claim the first from Redcot, where we have not had them early this year. The pears are from the tree which Jack planted when he was a boy in his garden.'

'Is there nothing more I can say from you?' asked Bennet, faltering in her wistfulness.

'Nothing; thanks.' Mrs. Prior froze again instantly.

Bennet was not to be favoured with any communication beyond what the things themselves called for. Mrs. Prior chose they should go, and therefore used the go-between, though the tokens of the mother's faithful remembrance and affection had to pass through Bennet Gray's hands. Well, Susie wouldn't care if she had the mushrooms, and surely the pears would taste all the sweeter to Jack in spite of the renunciation he had brought himself to write—a renunciation to which the person to whom it was written would not consent.

'Make Jack come out and see us,' was Jane's last injunction, given with a wavering smile, aloud, before everybody who cared to listen. Oh, it was not very difficult for her to transfer her right to Jack and her influence over him to another woman! Her own thoughts were straying from Redcot to a new home with another master than either John Prior or his son after him.

Bennet drove in solitary state to Newton, her mind wandering now and then from the business which engrossed it to her first drive along that road with Jane on the November afternoon, and to the last coming home, in the June prime of the year, with Jack, to be soon followed by a disastrous parting. But she was never sufficiently disengaged, hopeful, and far-sighted to dream of herself as one day mistress of Redcot driving in to Newton in a new carriage, with young horses and a young husband.

The market town had resumed its normal aspect—sleepy in summer, with dogs stretched in the middle of the pavement, cats sitting basking at open doors, birds in their cages hanging by open windows—stagnant in winter, with the animal world housed and doors and windows closed tightly. However vigorously gossip might still be prevailing in the interiors, it had ceased till a more exciting moment to flow out and be demonstrative in the streets. The aristocratic quarter of the Bank House, which had been roused from its repose on the day when Crabtree's Bank stopped payment, was restored to its pristine quiet. The large

houses with the flights of broad steps to their front doors, and the pillars to their garden gates, looked as fixed in their substantial respectability and serene dignity as ever. When Bennet passed the little green, shaded by its one big elm opposite the church porch, the clock in the church tower chimed the hour with a drowsily precise monotony that added to the peace of the blue air in which white butterflies and brown bees and swallows with ringed throats went and came. Did Susie and Jack listen to the bells as they rang out at sunset and in the hush of the night? And did they remind him of an all-seeing Judge who knew what the young man would not tell, though his silence might be dooming him and those he loved best to shame and misery? Was Susie moved by the old familiar sound to repent of the destruction she was bringing upon her father's house, the brother's ruin she was compassing beyond the hope of redemption? Susie had accustomed herself to regard

these bells as among the relics of a worn-out superstition, but did the solemn, wistful reverberations awaken no lingering echo in her heart in what must be her sharp tribulation?

The region was like itself, but its centre had undergone a melancholy transformation. The closed bank with its shuttered windows, was an image of death which gave a shock to the visitor who had not been there since the current of business was arrested at its source. The Bank House had no drawn blinds or locked doors, but it had a dead-alive, and, what was worse, a stigmatised air. The spacious, important building figured to Bennet's fancy as a ticket-of-leave house subjected to the unslumbering vigilance of the law, and to a nervous, horrified avoidance on the part of its neighbours. The man loitering at the corner was like a policeman out of uniform. There was nobody arriving or departing from the most hospitable of mansions. The doorsteps were not so spotlessly white as they had been wont to be when the numerous callers on Mrs. Lambert Crabtree's visiting list flocked from far and near to pay her their respects. The bell was not so promptly answered. Roger, the man-servant, who did duty in the déshabille of his working jacket, either for that or for some other reason, stared stupidly for a moment in answer to Bennet's inquiry for his mistress, as if he had not been accustomed to hear her asked for lately or to show up visitors to her.

Susie without her court! It was hard to conceive, even by one behind the scenes. But the mistress of the house was at home to Bennet, and she had only to wait a very few moments in the back drawing-room, where Jack had waited on the night before the ball. He was not waiting there now. Roger, who had taken up her card and slipped on his coat in the interval, returned to say Mrs. Crabtree would see Miss Gray in Mrs.

Crabtree's room. Bennet followed the man, with barely time to speculate where Jack could be, and to school her heart in the near prospect of the meeting with Susie in such circumstances.

CHAPTER V.

AN APPEAL TO SUSIE.

THERE was a hush in the house—not unlike that breathless pause between the going out of a life and the committal of dust to dust—which the naturally strident voices of Molly and Piers, subdued by distance, as they ranged the nursery regions, did little to break. The servant Roger, a steady, dull man of mature years, chosen for his imposing height and some talent in waiting at table, spoke in a whisper, and had a crushed, sat-upon air, as if recent events and police investigations had been too much for him. The housemaid whom Bennet passed on the landing first cast down a pair of somewhat sly eyes, as if it were impolite and unfeeling

under present circumstances to look at any stranger coming to the house; but on second thoughts the girl looked up and stared boldly. It was only the handsome governess at Redcot, who was no more than a better sort of servant herself, with whom no great ceremony need be practised, who might even exchange meaning glances with Sarah.

Lambert Crabtree was not with his wife, for which Bennet was thankful; neither was Jack, for which the new-comer felt inclined to think she was thankful also. She had made up her mind beforehand that if it had been otherwise she would have borne the brunt of whatever feelings Susie might have thought fit to express, and begged to speak with the young man apart.

Susie was alone, and had seemingly been doing nothing, though as a rule she was full of small occupations. She sat in the pretty, cosy room opening from her bedroom, and had been wrapped in a shawl. She must have been feeling, in spite of the warm weather, the

same fitful, spurious cold of which Bennet had been half conscious. As Susie rose, letting the shawl fall from her shoulders, it was seen that she was as carefully dressed as usual, but for the second time in her life, she gave the impression that she had not displayed her wonted nice judgment in the selection of colour and material. These were not becoming to her, though her dress in itself was as well thought out and finished in detail as her dresses always were. The colour was a dull blue, which did not harmonise with Susie's brunette complexion; the stuff was soft and clinging, exposing any failure in youthful plumpness, any growing tendency to prominence in elbow and neckbones and shoulder-blades.

Bennet received the same momentary shock which had struck Jack on the night of his return to England—that of a sudden meagreness, even meanness of outline and feature, a battered, broken, furtive look about the brilliant little beauty. It somehow struck Bennet

Gray, for the first time, with a sense of the unutterable pity and wretchedness of the affair where Susie Crabtree herself was concerned. It was as if one of the butterflies outside, flitting lightly and gaily across the gazer's path, had suddenly dropped at her feet with disabled wings—their delicate dust brushed off, themselves smirched by the soil with which they had come in contact, the entire butterfly a helpless, worthless creature, spoilt beyond mending in the grace and beauty which had been it sole claim to regard.

Before the notion could do more than flash across Bennet's mind, the idea was effaced by the rush of suavity and graciousness with which Susie received the intruder. A crushed butterfly, indeed! This was rather a small queen winningly affable to a remote satellite. For it was not Mrs. Lambert Crabtree's cue to acknowledge the engagement to her brother—of which she was quite well aware. She had also been told deliberately and advisedly by Mat

Crabtree of the true state of matters in reference to Bennet's money and to the assistance she was rendering Mr. Prior, on the ground of her engagement to his son, which she had confessed to him, and by which she stood. But Susie preferred, for various reasons, to see in Bennet only the little Woods' governess. So long as Bennet herself did not communicate certain facts to Susie, the latter was not obliged to admit an acquaintance with a reversal of position, which, in spite of Mrs. Lambert Crabtree's well-known amiability, was decidedly distasteful to her. She chose to ignore the truth as long as possible.

There was only a slight breach in Mrs. Crabtree's graciousness, when she stopped in the middle of her profuse declarations of pleasure at seeing Miss Gray, to ask sharply why her sister had not come. Susie went on to protest petulantly that Jane or mam-ma ought to be there to look after her, for she was in danger of dying of laughter since the tragedy of the bank rob-

bery had merged into the comedy of her and Jack being accused as the burglars. It was 'rich,' to quote Lamb, too good for anything out of Mark Twain. Susie said this with glittering eyes fastened on Bennet's face, so that not a shade of meaning there had a chance of escaping her.

'So pleasant for you to come, dear,' Mrs. Lambert Crabtree murmured in honeyed accents, after she had established her visitor in a lounge opposite her, 'when I happen, oddly enough, to be all by myself, idle and able to entertain you. Lamb has gone off to the opening of the new town hall at Malling. His brother was decidedly grumpy about it, and wished him to stay away. Such nonsense!—as if a man could not show himself in public because an unfortunate bank had failed, with the additional farce of the banker's wife being charged with breaking into it beforehand—for her private pleasure, I presume,' remarked Susie, with supreme scorn. 'Oh, dear; it is too absurd. Lamb will see all the neighbours as well as witness the ceremony,

and afford our friends some amusement with the tale of our grotesque dilemma.'

Bennet had her own opinion of the delicate propriety of Mr. Lambert Crabtree's appearance at the opening of the Malling town-hall, and also of the reception he was likely to meet with from his former friends if he attempted to rehearse for their benefit a haw-haw burlesque of his misfortunes.

But Susie did not wait to elicit an opinion. She wished to speak on her own account. 'I should have liked to have gone with Lamb, and seen all the world, and made them laugh,' she added with audacious coolness, 'at having to shake hands with a burglar or burglaress—which is it, dear Miss Gray? You know you are an authority as good as a dictionary.'

In speaking Susie had made mocking gesture of shaking hands, when two of the many rings she was in the habit of wearing dropped from the slender, waxen-like fingers, and rolled across the floor. Their owner anticipated Bennet in quickly stooping and picking them up,

protesting impatiently, as she replaced them, that jewellers were so stupid in making rings too large, as if everybody had hands like cooks.

'But even Lamb would not hear of me accompanying him,' Susie took up the dropped thread of her conversation in a plaintive, illused tone, 'in case any of these tiresome lawyers should call and wish to see me in my absence. I'm sure I've told them all I have to tell a hundred times,' she exclaimed wearily.

'Has your brother—has Mr. John Prior gone with Mr. Lambert Crabtree?' asked Bennet, forcing herself to a hesitating effort, in agitation that seemed in danger of suffocating her.

'What do you say? Whom do you mean? Is it Jack?' counter-questioned Susie, with a pretty puzzled air. 'I can't quite tell,' she answered carelessly. 'Anyhow, he is out;' Bennet's heart fell with the weight of lead. 'He is a good deal out in this fine weather. He goes fishing in the trout stream down in the meadows where the lawyers, if they like,

can find him, and tackle him too. What do they wish to get out of us?' She returned to her former grievance, her plaintiveness passing into peevishness. 'If there is nothing kept back, how can there be anything for them to discover? Unless they mean to work upon us by mental torture, as the Inquisitors—no doubt you can recall all about them, for you know everything, you happy woman—tortured the bodies of the victims, till we are driven to contradict ourselves and tell lies in sheer desperation. It is so silly, such a piece of red-tapism, to make so great a fuss about a wretched trifle,' she ended, with a quick, restless sigh.

'They cannot help themselves,' said Bennet gravely.

'But the money was not taken, after all,' insisted Susie. 'At least, I am told it was found secreted in odd places about the house, as a jackdaw might have secreted it. Do you think there had been any jackdaw or magpie in the Bank House, and that it could have

broken into the safe?' with a nervous, halfhysterical laugh. Then she began again more composedly—'The bank has failed, certainly, and it seems the assets do not produce much. I mention it in confidence; indeed, I believe you will have heard it already, since you are a person in trust at Redcot—I understand a great comfort to my family,' and Susie bent as gracefully and gratefully to Bennet as if the speaker were herself a pattern of filial virtue, and did not know a syllable more than she implied. 'It is doubtful if the bank is ever opened again, which is a pity, to be sure. But if a great many people are ruined, why, they are ruined, and it cannot be helped. The thing is done and cannot be undone. It will not bring the bank's credit or the people's money back, for them to persist in persecuting me and Jack.'

'It is not the people,' said Bennet, but Susie did not appear to hear or heed her.

'It was a good joke to begin with, but everybody must see it becomes tiresome when it is prolonged. It is horribly inconvenient after a time to be kept at home and teased by useless questions. It is not as if we—Lamb and I—have not suffered. We are ruined, I tell you, like the rest of the world, by that wretched bank for which Lamb was always working like a slave. We are positive paupers, dependent with our children on pap-pa and Mat Crabtree,' explained Susie in a tone of injured innocence, as if the impecuniousness she thus flaunted were an order of merit under the circumstances, a sign of integrity, and a claim to forbearance which could not be denied.

'I am afraid you don't understand,' said Bennet, gently enough, but with a quiver of indignation in her voice. The miserable little woman was, as Bennet had feared, impregnable in her selfishness, wilfully blind, nearly incapable of recognising any rights or needs save her own, and therefore hopelessly disingenuous and radically dishonest. 'The bank robbery, though it was baffled, is not in itself a trifle.

The situation of anybody implicated in it, even by suspicion, is serious. The police, with their experience, say the crime must have been attempted by some person well acquainted with the house, probably by some inmate of it.'

'The police will say anything,' said Susie, turning away her head. 'I have always heard the Bobbies are ninnies the instant they are taken off their ordinary beat.'

'I think that statement ought to be taken with some reserve,' answered Bennet drily: 'and we have to do with several highly-trained men from Scotland Yard as well as with the local police. Have you no suspicion, Mrs. Crabtree, of any member of your household who could have been misled and—and tempted into the commission of such an act?'

'No, unless that starling—starling was it, or jackdaw?' demanded Susie, with uneasy levity. 'No,' she repeated shortly and with a shade of sullenness, turning round the rings which had grown too loose for her fingers;

'no one can say I have accused anybody—not even Jack.'

'Jack!' exclaimed Bennet, in utter horror, 'your own brother, to whom you offered hospitality; you even pressed him to stay that he might be a support to you in your husband's absence.' This amount of information had been wrung from Jack with regard to his remaining at the Bank House in Newton in place of going out to Redcot on the evening of his arrival from Australia.

Susie winced, but recovered herself in a second. 'Well, I must say, Miss Gray,' she declared coldly, and with a little drawl, 'the interest which you are so good as to take in our family affairs carries you rather too far. If you will forgive me for mentioning it, it causes you to forget yourself, until you speak as if you were one of those martinets of lawyers of whom I was complaining. I am reduced to being unpleasant in my turn.'

'Mrs. Crabtree, you are proud of your

family,' Bennet tried the appeal. 'Is it not dreadful for a Prior of Redcot, perhaps the last representative of his name, to be in such a position? Would it not be worth any sacrifice to save him?'

'I have sufficient confidence in my family,' said Susie, sinking back with half-closed eyes, 'to be satisfied that they are perfectly able to take care of themselves without your troubling yourself, Miss Gray.'

'I have come from your father,' said Bennet, desperately. 'Do you know he is in terrible distress? His son, his only son, is under a criminal charge, which everybody who knows Jack, and you especially, are well aware, is totally without foundation. But, unfortunately, everybody does not know your brother, and if by any miserable misadventure there is a conviction, your father will never hold up his head again, and it will kill your mother.'

Susie moved restlessly. The red spots which had risen on her cheeks grew more burning, her

lips parted, and showed the little white teeth within, as if her beautiful mouth was set in a ghastly grin, until Bennet feared to look at her. 'Really, Miss Gray, your interest in us transcends everything—discretion, good-breeding, what shall I say? But I suppose I must excuse the liberty because of the excellence of the motive. I was not aware pap-pa was so fondly attached to Jack. Indeed, I was led to think that the old gentleman had come to regard his heir in the light in which many old gentlemen regard their heirs—as a ne'er-do-well from whom nothing good was to be expected.'

'You know it was very different,' cried Bennet, indignantly; 'you know your father would have rejoiced to acknowledge his mistake, and would have been the first to relinquish it if time had been given him. You know that these unhappy misunderstandings only make matters harder to bear now.'

'Upon my word, you give me credit for more knowledge than I possess,' said Susie, with a

slight supercilious gape. 'You know,' with an insolent imitation of Bennet's manner, 'that I never pretended to be anything save a simple woman, not a learned lady and female Solomon like you and Jane. I really don't know the meaning of this tirade—forgive me once more; you see the bad effects of listening to objectionable language. Pap-pa and mam-ma are very thin-skinned if they take to heart all the foolish scrapes in which their children find themselves. Ain't they concerned for me as well as for Jack?' with a shrillness of jealous emphasis that rose into an imperious cry, setting at nought all Susie's pretences of treating the whole business as a trifle. 'I am their child as much as he is, and I have not brought discredit on them.'

Bennet refrained by a strong force put upon herself from saying there might be two opinions on that head. She was still seeking to induce her companion to do justice while justice could yet be done, to prevent the wicked offering up of Jack, and to persuade Susie to redeem her

wrong-doing by a frank confession which should exonerate her brother and restore him without a reflection on his honour to his home and friends. At the same time, Bennet was honestly convinced that the right course would be the best for the culprit in every way. Bennet argued with herself that men's and women's positions are not the same. A man must do and suffer on his own account. But when a woman—especially a wife and mother—is betraved into an unlawful act, every extenuating circumstance is remembered in her favour. It is always understood that she might not have been her own mistress. Every allowance is made for the constraining, if not compelling, influence of another person, whose difficulties might have tempted him to exercise his power in an unwarrantable fashion. Bennet tried to say all this in general terms, and then sought to bring it home to her hearer.

'It is no secret now that Mr. Lambert Crabtree was deeply embarrassed. He may

have thought, and made others think, that if he could tide over a particular date he would be saved. He may have believed that he could use and restore the money in time to escape detection; many men fall into that snare. It is the commonest of delusions, though, of course, it is not true, and it is not right—not right!' repeated Bennet, unable, in her integrity, to persist in the euphemism; 'it is to cross the boundary which divides honesty from dishonesty, to overstep the bounds that make a man a keeper or a plunderer of his neighbours' goods. But oh! Susie Crabtree. don't vou see that all mercy and consideration will be shown to you if you will return to your duty and right Jack, whom you have so cruelly wronged? You need not even throw the blame on your husband. A wife is not called on to do that, and I have reason to think in this case it will be taken for granted, though not acted upon. Mr. Lambert Crabtree will not be arrested or placed in danger—there is no charge against him. You have simply to say it was you who unlocked the safe and took out the notes and bonds, that your brother had nothing to do with the robbery, and knew nothing of it any more than your innocent children knew.'

Bennet stopped abruptly, for Susie rose up flaming with wrath. 'I have stood a good deal from you, Miss Gray, but this is too much. I have never dreamt of asking your advice, and you volunteer an opinion that I should criminate myself in a matter with which it seems you are better acquainted than I. Bonds? What bonds? I never heard of them. I am unable to follow you.'

The bonds had been mentioned in Susie's presence before, but she had been too excited to notice the allusion. Poor Major Coplestone's missing property meant nothing to her. She made a struggle to keep down her passion, and seeking to substitute haughtiness for anger, lapsed in a trice into feminine puerility. 'Among other things I have to complain of,' protested

Susie tearfully, in the strength of her emotion, while I address you as Miss Gray I do not see that you have the smallest title to call me "Susie Crabtree;" me, a married woman, the daughter of your employer! I think you must have lost your senses.'

Bennet thought she had.

At that moment a tap at the door was heard, and the disputants were interrupted by the entrance of Roger, carrying gingerly the baskets of pears and mushrooms on a large silver salver. He announced, in a voice which had grown both hollow and wheezy of late, 'If you please, ma'am, some summer fruit from Redcot.'

Susie was herself again before the salver could be put on the table, or Roger could quit the room; she clapped her hands and tripped across to take the gift. 'Oh, how charming! I did think mam-ma and Martha had been selfish and set aside all the mushrooms for ketchup.' She picked out the largest and began

to nibble at it, but suddenly threw it down with a fresh exclamation—'Goodness! I forgot, they are not cooked. I hope I have not poisoned myself, though I daresay some people would think that not a great loss—only, of course,' with a malicious, defiant glance at Bennet, 'I should carry away all my secrets with me, which ought to make my life safe from conspirators.' She went on flippantly, 'Such things happen nowadays, bank robberies and the rest, that murders do not sound so much out of the way —do they? Are the pears for the babies? No, for mammy's boy. I feel as if I should remember that he had some infantile taste of the kind—so very green, that like drinking milk and pulling daisies, they ought to be a warrant for his innocence,'

'Good-bye, Mrs. Crabtree,' said Bennet, without offering the hand which might have been scornfully rejected or softly clasped and tenderly squeezed as the humour of the new or the old Susie prevailed.

'Good-bye, Miss Gray. Won't you suggest the magpie theory at Redcot and supply the lawyers with a "wrinkle"?' was Susie's parting shot, and she looked not unlike a magpie herself at the instant she fired it.

CHAPTER VI.

A REMONSTRANCE WITH JACK.

As Bennet Gray descended the stairs at the Bank House, she felt too foiled and miserable to be exasperated. She was able, however, to turn over in her mind the distance to the meadows by the trout stream, and the possibility of overtaking a solitary fisher who might have started hours before. Then she suddenly caught through a lobby window a glimpse of Jack Prior walking in the garden, and her spirits rose like quicksilver.

Bennet had taken her resolution before she was at the foot of the stairs. She had a cunning enemy to do battle with for Jack and his father, for truth and right. Bennet must

engage Susie with her own weapons, and condescend to stratagem, to which Miss Gray had vowed never to demean herself again, but it was in order to vanquish the common foe.

Bennet Gray was sufficiently familiar with the Bank House to know that there was a garden-door kept unlocked during the day, which, as in the case of several other gardendoors in the vicinity, opened into the suburban end of the High Street leading to the church, bank, etc. She relied on entering the garden by this door without letting any member of the family, unless, perhaps, the gardener, know that she was going to take a stroll among the beds and borders. She also recollected with her natural nimbleness of mind that there was a screen of tall osiers which divided the upper and kitchen garden from the lower, which was the flower garden. The osiers were purposely intended to shut out the view of prosaic forcing frames and vulgar turnips and onions from the windows of the house. Bennet could only trust that she might be able from the farther side of the screen to attract Jack's attention and summon him to join her. If she did not gain a hearing from him in this way, she felt assured that Susie would not permit any meeting between them which would not be brought to a speedy conclusion by her intervention.

But as luck, or, as Bennet liked better to think, Providence ruled, Jack in his aimless loitering to get rid of his time and his wretchedness had sauntered to the upper part of the garden, and was actually standing alone there, idly contemplating a sprawling cucumber. Bennet walked in, and the occupant of the path looked up, manifestly startled, and took a step forward, then remembering all, lifted his hat, made a bow—formal for Jack—and positively said—'Good morning, Miss Gray. Has Susie asked you to call the gardener? Shall I find him for you?'

Bennet would not have been astonished vol. III.

though the raising of Jack's hat had shown him as white-headed as his father, for, though the brown locks which belonged to his fiveand-twenty years had been spared, the haggardness which brought into prominent relief the heavy forehead, the deep-set eyes from which the sparkle had fled, the full drooping mouth, rendered the likeness otherwise doubly striking. But she was not to be put off with such a salutation from the young lover, who had found her in what many people would have called her obscurity, poverty, and drudgery, and been willing to throw up his prospects in order to go away and work with and for her. Bennet did what she could never have imagined herself doing, in her maidenly modesty, to mortal man—were he fortune's first favourite. She went up to the trapped and betrayed lad, straight and swift as an arrow, and in response to his bow, his 'Miss Gray,' his ceremonious questions, she put her arms round his neck, before he knew what she was going to do,

kissed him on the lips, and cried for explanation—' Dear, dear Jack, I have found you!'

Inevitably Jack lost his head—the wisest son of Adam would have done it in the circumstances—forgot his solemn resolutions, clasped the woman whom he loved, and who loved him, to his heart, as if nothing on earth could ever come between them, and kissed her back again with interest.

At last he let her go, and drew away with a groan. 'Ah! Bennet, it is like you to come like this, but it cannot be, my dear little woman.' (Be it remembered that Bennet was as tall as Jack, but the male creature will assert his superiority in some fashion.) 'It must not be, so that your kindness is harder to bear than coldness, though that is not your fault.'

'No, no, Jack; never!' she protested, coming close to him again, passing her arm through his and causing him, with a faint resistance on his part, to walk with her, 'That

would be doing away with all the good of Cousin Josh's money. To think that I have never told you of my fortune!—that we, who are most concerned in it, have never had a single talk over it, though you have heard about it from others! Wasn't it wonderful that it should come to the proper person just at the proper time? Why don't you smile and agree with me? Don't you know it is all to be plain sailing now in our affairs, after you have got out of this little mess?'

She talked eagerly for fully ten minutes, of what great things he and she would do with her money—what help they might render to Mr. Prior at Kershaw; what benefits they might confer on the miners; how much per cent. the two should give back of the rents to the farmers till their better days came; what cottages must be built; what pleasure found for Mrs. Prior and Jane; what treats for the children and Tommy.

It was as if she sought to dazzle him

with a glimpse of all he was renouncing, to bribe him not to sacrifice it and her and himself.

Jack listened with his head bent down and his eyes on the ground, and said sorrowfully, 'Good little woman!' and 'Kind, tender soul!' by way of answer.

Then she spoke more to the purpose and besought him with all her might, as she had besought Susie, 'For your father and mother's sake, and for mine, Jack, if you do not care for yourself, I implore you tell all that you know without reservation. Mr. Cobb' (naming Jack's counsel) 'says you are keeping something back, and that the mere impression you are doing so will go against you. He says he believes you have some idea how these keys came in the place where they were found, and your refusing to tell anything about them is sheer madness. It will not save her, there is sufficient proof to condemn her without that, and she will be screened behind her husband, though he has

managed to escape the clutches of the law. Oh! you may be sure she will be dealt with gently on your father's account, on Mat Crabtree's, and because she may have been-no doubt she was—simply the tool of Lambert Crabtree. He appears to have kept her in the dark with regard to the chief motive for the crime—those Mexican and Peruvian bonds of poor Major Coplestone's, which are missing to this day. Even at the worst, is it reasonable, is it right, is it fair to your people and me, is it loyal to God, to give up all, even to your good name and your liberty, to dare—oh, my God! to dare—being a convict, an outcast, for Susie, who decoyed and dragged you into the peril to lessen the risk for herself, without a thought of the consequences to you?'

But Jack only shook his head in a despairing negative. It may be that he was not far enough removed from his schoolboy career to have risen above the iron obligation in a schoolboy's code of honour. He would let nothing

—no breach of the laws, human or divine—force him to become an informer. He would die rather than tell tales.

Jack could not turn against his sister, proclaim what he now understood perfectly, cut away possibly the last solid ground from under her feet, and leave her cowering alone, hooted by her fellows, before a judgment seat. He could not—no, not even for Bennet Gray or his mother, or anything or anybody that Redcot and the future might hold for him.

'If it come to the worst and things go against me,' said poor Jack, with something like a sob in his voice, 'you will stay on with them, dear, at Redcot. Perhaps it is selfish to you to think of it, but you are alone in the world, and I know you too well to believe you will mind the disgrace they have not deserved. You will still let the old house be your home, and fill a daughter's place there after all. You will try and make up for what I have been and done in some of the ways you have been

describing so nicely. You will do it far better than I ever should, and I fancy it will be a comfort both to you and to them—I tell you it will be a thundering comfort to me, Bennet. You will be better to the mother than ten sons, and it will be I who gave you to her.'

Bennet was crying as quietly as she could, not to distress him. 'Your mother does not like me, Jack,' she said, shaking her head. 'I thought I had won her regard when she only knew me as a schoolmistress and Jane's friend. But she cannot forgive me, and I do not deserve it, for deceiving her, after I had come between you.'

'Oh! all that will pass,' said Jack, with the ghost of his old, cheery confidence. 'The mother is not one to bear malice long. There is no fellow going half so generous, unless it be yourself. She will be very fond of you.'

'If it were your father,' said Bennet, smiling faintly through her tears, 'I could have more faith in it.'

'I hear you are great friends with the governor,' said Jack, brightening again. 'All right. Mat Crabtree—he is a good fellow, Mat—told me about it. Well, though my father made enough of me as a boy, to be admitted to his friendship as a man was an honour he never conferred on me.'

'Oh! Jack, if you had only been patient and tried to understand and please him! He is generous, too, and he has suffered so much. I am sure he has a good heart and cares for you—your mother does not care more.'

Jack shrugged his shoulders slightly, but he said 'All right' again. 'Poor old chap, I have been little help or credit to him; but I have brought you to him also, and I hope I am not such a heartless beast as to resent my loss being his gain. I am glad of it.'

There was a pause, and Jack's eye fell on a half-withered red rose which Bennet was wearing. She had forgotten it was the time of roses, but she had mechanically accepted

a rose from one of the children, and fastened it in the lace of her dress.

'Will you give me that rose, Bennet?' he asked, putting up his hand.

'Not this half-withered thing,' she objected, covering it with her own hand. 'Sam picked it and gave it to me. It has only a quarter of an inch of stalk, and has lost half its leaves. If I had noticed, I should have taken it out and flung it away. It is not worth your having. I'll give you a basket of roses, and pay the price of falling fathoms in the estimation of Robert, the gardener, if you will come out to Redcot, as Jane bade me make you come. No? Then I shall venture out from behind the screen and gather for you the very finest Bank House rose. It is not too good for you, Jack; if you are not entitled to it I don't know who is,' she said, with some bitterness.

'A Bank House rose!' he exclaimed, with a frown; 'there would be a scorpion in the flower. What do I care for the Bank House roses? It would be well if I had never seen them. That is not saying too much. No, Bennét,' covering her hand with his, 'this one Redcot rose, which you have worn, from you,' and he had it instantly.

Jack openly accompanied Miss Gray to the Redcot phaeton, and put her in before any portion of the public that chose to look on and say it was a shame of the Priors to throw a fine-looking, lady-like girl, such as the little Woods' governess, in the way of the reprobate Jack Prior had proved himself—a fellow as good as convicted of felony. Abduction, or any kindred crime, would be nothing to him. Had the girl no friends to look after her and take her away from Redcot, since this was the manner in which the Priors made use of her?

Jack could not be brought to say that he would come out to Redcot, and Bennet knew that he would not come. She knew almost as well as if he had told her that in his own mind

he thought it was not unlikely he had seen the last of his father's house, where he was born, of which he and Bennet should have been master and mistress in their turn; he was probably bound for very different quarters—all Susie's doing. Yet he could not curse Susie any more than he could denounce her. He could only wonder at her, awe and horror struggling with an inexpressible pity in his heart. Susie, his lovely, mischievous, little sister, his kind, merry hostess many a time—a Delilah, a Jezebel! It was incredible, but, if it could be believed, the grief of it melted rather than hardened him.

Bennet was driving back full of care and sorrow. Yet the pleasure of having been with Jack had been great, the assurance of his love and that she was a comfort to him, though not in the way she wanted, very sweet. She half forgot the misery of the admission that her errand had been a double failure till she saw John Prior's tall, gaunt figure

plodding along the road in the hot afternoon sun to meet her. He had been so impatient for her news that he could not wait for the arrival of the phaeton, and sought to forestall it. She got out to walk with him and tell him everything from a full heart. Her story was not finished when they were nearing the house, and he made her turn aside till the two were at the entrance to Redcot Quarry. Everything was green and luxuriant still, though the songs of the birds were well-nigh over, and the brambles were shedding their blossoms. The dim outline of a footpath, a single track, meandered up among the rocks and bushes. Mr. Prior held out his hand to lead Bennet to the higher ground. She followed him, a little surprised, but still thinking most of finishing her tale.

He let her end it, then suddenly broke in, 'Look there.' She followed the direction of his eyes and hand, but saw nothing except the low-lying Ladslove meadows, with their cattle magnified in the sunny haze. She turned mystified, troubled eyes back upon him.

' Miss Gray,' he said—and she had a keen apprehension that his manner was a little wild—'let me tell you before the burden drag me down to the nethermost pit. There is coal in these meadows. I am acquainted with the very spot beneath which the mineral lies. I could have pointed out the place as it happened it was beneath our very feet when Lambert Crabtree begged and bullied me to tell him what I knew. He warned me what would be the result of my silence, and his words were not quite as idle tales to me, though I must say, in justice to myself, I paid little heed to the most savage of his insinuations. I played the dog in the manger, for I could not use the secret, which I withheld from him when it might have saved him—saved the bank—saved Susie and Jack.'

Bennet took it all in, words and meaning.

A dimness came over her eyes, and a sick thrill to her heart, as she realised for a moment what might have been, which John Prior showed her. Jack, free and fearless, lighthearted as of old, without a cloud the size of a man's hand on his horizon; even Susie's fair fame untouched; the bank solvent, its clients unnijured; Bennet's money making everything easy at Redcot, Mr. Prior her firm friend, Jane her sworn ally, Mrs. Prior reconciled—cordiality and satisfaction on every hand.

But she shook off the demoralising effect of dwelling on the dream, which had not been fulfilled. She looked piteously in the worn face, which was like Jack's grown old—nay, Jack's with such remorse and misery looking out of the hollow eyes, such suffering in the deep lines about the mouth, as Jack, in his regret and self-reproach and horrified appreciation of the situation, had never experienced. For Bennet comprehended at this moment, with a flash of intuition, that John Prior's

lot in the matter had been harder even than his son's.

'You did it for the best,' she said slowly and softly; 'all a man's instincts must have risen up against yielding to such unmanly pressure as was put upon you. Perhaps, though you had given in, there would not have been time. The discovery of the coal might not have staved off the temptation and ruin. You could not foresee the course of events,'

'You are a good woman,' he said abruptly, turning to go home, 'like her in the house there. She does not know this, but she was always of opinion that I bore hard upon the boy, yet she has not once referred to it, or blamed me by word or look, during these last wretched weeks. Poor Jack and I have been alike in this—that we have fared better than most men, infinitely better than we deserved, where women were concerned.'

'Do not say that,' she entreated, 'though it is good of you. Jack knows now how much you have cared for him all the time. I believe he is more sorry for you than for himself. He says he was little help or credit to you—but he would have been in time. Oh! Mr. Prior, take heart, and he will yet be a good squire and master——'

'Good Lord,' muttered John Prior, 'a squire who has been tried for a bank robbery! A coal owner who has been in the dock—not for manslaughter, not because his negligence has caused accidents with loss of life in his pits, but because he was privy to a burglary from which the most hardened poacher among the men would have held aloof!'

'It is not true,' said Bennet; 'and a lie can always be lived down.'

CHAPTER VII.

THE FIRST DAY OF THE TRIAL.

The trial of Susan Crabtree and John Prior, younger, of Redcot, who were accused of robbing the safe of Crabtree's Bank, Newton, took place in the late summer circuit, when the Assize was held at Crowminster. The family at Redcot were spared the ordeal of being called as witnesses. John Prior was dissuaded from his original intention of facing the worst at once, and making what atonement he could for his share in the wrong-doing by being present in the court.

'I will go, and bring you back word every night,' offered the woman who, even before Jack's father and mother, had the heaviest

stake in the verdict. 'Nobody knows me save as the Redcot governess at Crowminster, nor for that matter at Newton. Nobody will take any notice of my being there. In fact, they will guess that I have come to use my eyes and ears and report for your benefit. Historical precedents are not wanting,' she ended with a poor little attempt at pleasantry. 'My duties will not last over two days, perhaps not over one, and Richard will put the mare on her best paces that we may be the first to announce an acquittal.'

In truth it was a relief for Bennet to be up and doing to the last. She was like a man in this respect, though so womanly in others; and she had a notion that it might be some small consolation to Jack to recognise her face with the veil of strangeness on it for the strange crowd around him. There was no exposure for her in the present. She could trust herself not to give way. There would be time enough for that in the future—the

future which, at the best, might bring a certain amount of betrayal with it, when she was seen and known as Jack Prior's wife. But what would be the extent of the revelation after all? That she had stood by her lover throughout his tribulation; that she had not deserted him in his evil day, and neither Jack nor she would feel ashamed of that peculiarity in their history.

Besides, the sight of Bennet at the decisive moment might overbalance the influence of Susie, and move Jack at last to convey to his lawyer a word on the question which chiefly implicated him. Bennet could hardly tell whether she would welcome or deprecate that burst of indignant candour on Jack's part. It would save him, there was little doubt, but save him probably to be a prey to much the same scruples—morbid if one chose to call them so—which had wrecked his father's peace. And the deliverance which he would thus have wrought for himself would be altogether unlike Jack.

Ultimately it was ruled that Bennet should not go to the trial alone, but under the guardianship of Mat Crabtree, and an aunt of the Crabtrees, whom he had rooted out with the general idea that she might be a boon to Susie under the devoutly-to-be-wished-for sequel of her release. There was an amount of inextinguishable credulity where he had to do with women in Mat Crabtree's imagining for a second that any woman, especially any elderly woman, could afford a shade of solace to Susie, under whatever conceivable circumstances of acquittal or condemnation. If there had been—not any, but one woman to whom this creature at bay, just saved from punishment by the narrowest loophole, would have turned, it was certainly not Miss Hopkins any more than it was Bennet Gray.

But at least, Mat had not been so inconsiderate as to drag a venerable relative from her retirement and repose, under the hallucination that she might minister acceptably and

successfully to a pretty, interesting young offender. Miss Hopkins, as sometimes happens, was little older than her nephews. She had a narrow income, and led a narrow life, and being stolid in her well-meaningness, was more disposed to relish the excitement of going to the trial at Crowminster, with her nephew Mat to take care of her—all her expenses paid, and a handsome present hovering in the near distance—than to shrink from the task imposed upon her. Certainly Miss Hopkins had sustained a shock when she read of the attempted robbery of Crabtree's Bank, of the failure of the bank, and, finally, that her nephew Lambert's wife was one of the persons accused of the robbery. But on the other hand, Mat had assured her that the Priors—Mrs. Lambert was a Prior—were highly respectable people, and that in all probability the charge, if it were not withdrawn, would break down, in which case Susie Crabtree would be a victim and heroine, instead of a criminal.

It was the early morning of a mellow day in August, which seemed to anticipate the weather that sportsmen love in September Bennet could almost fancy she heard firing betimes in the turnip fields and among the coverts. She caught herself watching in vain for brown or grey coated figures attended by troops of exultant dogs. She could not help being reminded of what Jack's natural occupation would have been, if his rashness and heedlessness had not shaped themselves into dire disaster, if fate or Providence had not willed it otherwise. She might have been walking out with Jane to see the sport. They might have been coaxing Mrs. Prior, if the gentlemen were not too far off, to venture along the pleasant field paths, and have a blithe luncheon with the sportsmen by this hedge or that brook. They might all have been laughing over poor Tommy's abject dismay at the crack of a gun,

Instead, Bennet was driving with Mat Crab-

tree and Miss Hopkins. Mat was grimly silent and heavily oppressed whenever he was not under the necessity of keeping up the spirits of his companions. Miss Hopkins required that all the country houses and villages the travellers passed should be named to her, and that she should be furnished with biographical sketches of the inhabitants. She also exacted that proper attention should be paid to her own remarks on the advantages of the landscape for sketching purposes, with elaborate comparisons of it to other landscapes unknown to the listeners. Finally, she expected that proper attention should be paid to her sagacious and practical estimates—since Miss Hopkins believed she had a reputation to keep up for sagacity and practicality becoming her years—of the season's prospects in the matter of crops, and the chances for the agricultural labourer in the coming winter.

It seemed straining Bennet's powers of endurance to the utmost to drive quietly along

the road—so like other country roads, in the morning sunshine of the genial August day with an exacting common-place companion for ever starting ordinary topics of conversation, and to shut one's eyes for a moment and realise what lay behind and what lay before. Redcot, more desolate than if the blinds were drawn and the shutters closed before the presence of the dead—the packed Court House, with Jack and Susie brought up for trial.

But Bennet found it was a still more cruel experience to survive when Miss Hopkins discussed the topic of the day in a cut and dry manner, coolly speaking out contingencies which no one else had dared to breathe to themselves. 'I should think that if poor Mrs. Lambert does not get off without more ado-I mean if there is any misadventure of justice, she cannot be subjected to worse than a short term of imprisonment. But, for the young man, her brother, he is in a bad plight. I should say he runs the risk of seven, even of fourteen years—not of Botany Bay, for, unfortunately, Botany Bay won't take our convicts nowadays, but of Dartmoor or Portland. Dear me! he will never be able to show face again after that. What a pity that Botany Bay couldn't have been kept for first-class misdemeanants—ain't that the word? A youth like this John Prior might have pulled up there, after he had sown his wild oats, and his father might have sent him out money. Altogether, he would have been as well disposed of as he deserved and as circumstances would permit. Many younger sons don't fare much better.'

'You don't understand, Aunt Lydia,' Mat tried to shut her mouth. 'If anyone is innocent in this wretched affair it is Jack Prior, and he is the only son, the squire's heir and successor at Redcot.'

'Dear, dear!' exclaimed Miss Hopkins, taking the additional misfortune easily enough, for the very good reason that it was of no moment to her. 'Our neighbours' reverses are lessons to us—don't you think so, Miss Gray? Everything in the world so unsteady, no saying what a day or an hour may bring forth. Mat, has there been sufficient attempt made to find the real criminals? That always seems to me the best mode of clearing the innocent. Has there been enough energy exerted in tracking the guilty?'

'We may trust the police for that. I can vouch they have not been idle,' said Mat, temporising, and suppressing a groan.

'Well, then, have you thought of establish ing an alibi? All my reading goes to show that an alibi is an excellent resource in an unjust accusation.'

'You will allow,' said Mat, impatiently, 'that it is a ticklish thing to establish an alibi when the robbery was committed in the middle of the night, and when both the accused persons were confessedly in the Bank House at the time.'

'But, of course, they were sleeping in their beds—and they can prove that!' cried Miss Hopkins, triumphantly.

'Aunt Lydia, if you can at any time get rid of strong suspicion by satisfying judges and jury—without extraneous aid, mind you—that you were sleeping in your bed at a given hour, your power of convincing your fellow-creatures does you credit.'

'I, Mat! what have I to do with such a situation?' protested Miss Hopkins, in outraged respectability. 'I was never subjected to suspicion, nor am I likely to be, I am thankful to say. Do I look like a woman who could be supposed capable of committing such deeds? I can tell you before this young lady, though she is living in Mr. Prior's family, it is painful enough for me to find that I am connected by marriage—not by blood, Miss Gray—with people who are liable to be suspected.'

And Mat had some trouble in pacifying his offended relative.

Solitude would have been bliss even in the circumstances, compared to the torture of Miss Hopkins's companionship. Bennet had already discovered that there might be disadvantages to balance the gains of her incognito. She had to learn the lesson to a still greater extent presently. When Crowminster was reached, just before the opening of the court, the streets, always full at Assize times, were more crowded than usual. Among the shoals of visitors whom so extraordinary a case as the Crabtree Bank robbery brought to the town for the day, Miss Gray detected a tolerable sprinkling of the Priors' acquaintances. They scuttled out of Mat Crabtree's way, as they had religiously abstained from visiting Redcot lately. It might be that not many of them—perhaps not one of the women would appear openly in the Court -still they were there, eager to see from behind a screen, to hear on the earliest opportunity the scandal of the trial.

Mat Crabtree relieved his mind by pointing

out to Bennet Gray the thronged condition of a draper's shop opposite the Court House.

'Do you know why that man has so many county customers to day?' Mat inquired, sharply.

Then he answered his own question with a curling lip—'Because the upper windows of his ware-rooms command a view of the Court House. Ladies and gentlemen stationed where the draper's bales are wont to be piled can get a bird's-eye vision of much of the legal drama opposite—including judges, jury, and prisoners. In the meantime the curious gazers do not incur the odium of having come to gloat on the disgrace of their former friends.'

Some of these ardent students of humanity, notably a group of frisky young matrons, though they avoided Mat Crabtree, pounced upon Miss Gray, and detained her behind her party. She was only the governess at Redcot, of whom her assailants had not taken much notice formerly, seeing that she was not in

their sphere; but she was somebody to-day. She was sure to have a great deal of interesting information to impart, while it was not to be supposed that she was so affected by the family trouble as to be beyond speaking of it. 'Oh! Miss Gray, so glad to have met you. Do tell us how are poor dear Mr. and Mrs. Prior and Miss Prior? So sad for them. How are they bearing up under this frightful calamity? We could not bring ourselves to drive over, though we were so anxious to hear, lest the poor Priors should dream we were intruding or prying into their concerns, which we should never dream of doing-nothing could be farther from our intentions—so that it is quite a godsend for us to have come across you.' 'Is it true that Mrs. Crabtree is very ill, and will not be brought into court? ' another speaker broke in.

'Is there any foundation for the report tha Jack has forfeited his bail and gone off, so that the sentence of outlawry will be pronounced upon him? It is quite too incredible that the

robbery was Susie's act—a pretty, bright creature like that, so sweet and trustful; though, between you and me, Miss Gray, she was shockingly extravagant, and she may have been the dupe of a scamp of a husband. His poor brother is much to be felt for—he will shut himself up with his books more than ever now. But Lambert was a coarse man, though he was a Crabtree. We never liked him or could guess what Susie Prior saw in him to tempt her to marry him; very likely her father and mother thought it a good match, which explains But as for Jack Prior, though nobody dreamt of such a miserable end as this comes to, it was no secret that he has been a great grief to his father, who gave him up long ago.'

'You are mistaken,' said Bennet, stifling her anger and pain, but speaking stiffly and sternly, careless on her own account of the bad impression she produced on her audience. 'If Mr. Prior's son was a grief to him in the

past, the fault was not necessarily all on one side. Mr. Prior says that himself to-day. He has perfect faith in the young man's innocence. Forfeit his bail! Who said such a thing? Do you think a guiltless man who never knew either fear or falsehood would so defame himself? Why, even a timid woman like his sister would brave the worst before she sought such a cowardly refuge. Mr. Prior is ready to receive his son, and welcome him to his place at Redcot the moment he comes back.'

'Oh! indeed; we are glad to hear it,' replied the inquisitors, by the mouth of their chief spokeswoman, expressing themselves very dubiously, and with considerable reserve. 'We may have been misinformed. We can only hope the judge and jury will be of your and Mr. Prior's opinion.'

The moment Bennet was gone the verdict was pronounced, unanimously in this instance. The governess girl, who had been thoroughly spoiled by Jane Prior in her learned folly,

was a perfect firebrand. It was exceedingly foolish in a young unmarried woman—in her position especially—to become the champion of a lad in Jack Prior's distressing circumstances, a flighty young fellow at the best, sufficiently above her in rank to account for the dust which had been thrown in her eyes.

Bennet Gray might have entered the court herself a prisoner under a criminal charge, so far as the mist before her eyes, the hum in her ears, the whirl in her head, and the tumultuous beating of her heart went. But this only lasted for a time. She must control herself if she would be of any use to Mr. Prior, any comfort to Jack.

Mat Crabtree got seats for his companions before he occupied his place near the counsel for the defence. Bennet's sole desire with regard to her seat had been that, while it was where she could see and hear, and be within view of Jack, it should be as inconspicuous as possible, and she might steal to it with the

least observation. This was not easy where Miss Hopkins was concerned. She was a woman of imposing presence in every way, from her large nose with its high ridge to her habit of making audible observations on all that passed. She was certainly daunted for a second by the spectacle of the court and the consideration on whom it was to sit. 'Good heavens! to think that Mrs. Lambert is to come in before all these men with their files of papers, and be nominally treated as though she were the offscourings of the earth,' Miss Hopkins muttered, and subsided into meekness for a space. Unfortunately the impression was fleeting. Miss Hopkins was an independent, self-sufficing woman, and she soon began to congratulate herself that it was 'a far cry' to the country town in which she dwelt, so that, though her cronies might read the trial in the newspapers with what gusto she could guess, it was exceedingly unlikely that any of them would be personally present on the occasion.

Apart from selfish considerations, Miss Hopkins had no objection to notoriety, even as the relative by marriage of county gentry, who had so grossly mismanaged their affairs that they were suspected of crime, and had come within the range of the law. She did not subdue her voice or modify the tone of her remarks in order to secure the obscurity which Bennet had been tempted to hug.

'Friends of Mrs. Lambert Crabtree's and Mr. John Prior's,' Bennet was not long in hearing whispered on all sides. She believed she and Miss Hopkins would be fortunate if they missed forming one of the groups in an illustrated paper, the clever artist of which had been sent down expressly from the metropolis to pick up grist for the publishers' mill in scenes from the remarkable trial.

But these annoyances, though Bennet was still capable of feeling them, were pin pricks after all. Perhaps they served to rouse her from the stupor of sorrow and shame into which she was in danger of sinking, and diverted her mind a little from the strain of concentration on one point.

All was very much as Bennet had sought, with torturing ingenuity and liveliness of imagination, to picture it beforehand. The masses of people in the body of the court, the professional lawyers and reporters, with their cool, easy, accustomed-to-the-thing air, the judges, in their grandiose horse-hair, silk and ermine—one of them, an elderly man with a fresh complexion, bearing a ludicrous resemblance to a last-century dame, highly rouged and powdered—all were there as she had fancied them.

When Bennet dared to look round among the crowded audience, it was a relief to her not to see many faces she could recognise. The miners of Kershaw were, as a rule, notorious for remaining off work in spite of fines and every other discipline that could be invented to restrain the men, whenever any

holiday that was to their liking presented itself. They pled the privations and hardships of underground life for claiming this and other privileges. Distance and fatigue were nothing to the colliers. They had been known to start in the middle of the night and tramp a score of miles for the pleasure of beholding the last hanging which took place outside the walls of a jail in the county. Hangings as a spectacle were exploded, except for jail officials; but an exciting trial was still an infinitely greater treat than the most popular play could have been to these thoroughly realistic critics. Yet, to the credit of collier honour, there was hardly a representative of the miners of Kershaw present in the Court House when their master's son and daughter stood their trial. If any of Bennet's or Jane's scholars were there, they must have kept their faces hidden from observation. Only one set of hard-favoured features struck Bennet in a vague way as familiar to her. She had forgotten when and where it

had become familiar, but she had really seen it, at unlikely hours, lurking about the gates at Redcot. The face belonged to Mr. Isaac Evans—pseudo-spy and informer, who attended the Assize with a keener relish because the leading case concerned the near relatives of two of his employers.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE ENTRANCE OF THE PRISONERS—THE EVIDENCE LED.

What must serve as the sensation of the day, if the trial dragged on for more than a few hours, was the entrance of the prisoners into the court, ushered by a turnkey and warder. Jack Prior came first, and Bennet clutched at the edge of the bench before her to help her to bear the sudden surging of the solid earth around her. Her heart leapt up again with a bound to see how manly and composed Jack, in his ordinary morning suit, looked as an innocent man should look, amidst the most compromising surroundings. There was a shade of youthful scorn and defiance in the manliness,

but there could be no question that the selfcontrol and calmness were genuine attributes of the lad's bearing, any more than there could be two opinions on the fact that he had inherited his father's plainness. Still, the look of John Prior of Redcot did his son no harm in the eyes of those present who knew the elder man. He was an unfortunate man, who had not prospered, who was understood to be disappointed and soured by the course life had taken with him. He had reached the climax of his misfortunes in the strange lot for a man in his station, of being the father of the two prisoners at the bar, but any thought of personal dishonour in connection with him was to this day singularly inadmissible.

In Bennet Gray's eyes Jack Prior was all that he should have been. She could not have wished him to look like an Apollo, or to carry himself differently by a hair's breadth. It was a happiness to her even at this moment that his face brightened inexpressibly when their eyes met, although he turned away immediately and bent his head. She could conceive why. She thought she could realise what he must feel at her seeing him thus, just as she imagined she understood what made him bend his head still lower, and even hide his face with his hand for a moment, when a little stir served to indicate that Susie was coming to take her place beside him.

'What an ugly, down-looking young man!' Miss Hopkins was remarking emphatically. 'I don't like to be uncharitable, but these beetle-brows and that Tartar nose and negro mouth are remarkably like what one would meet in Whitechapel, or see in Madame Tussaud's Chamber of Horrors.'

'How dare you say such things, Miss Hopkins?' Bennet was galled into a fierce whisper. Happily Miss Hopkins was not listening, she rarely listened when she could talk. 'I must say,' she went on dogmatically, 'that repulsive-looking lad is a strange graft

from the criminal classes into a highly respectable county family. I was told the Priors were of good standing when my nephew Lambert married among them, and Mat confirmed the statement when he wrote the other day, and summoned me to stand by them. But really I could believe anything of that lad—I wonder if there is a possibility of his having been changed at nurse? Such things do happen occasionally, you know, in real life as well as in novels. Ah! there is Mrs. Lambert. How prettily and modestly dressed she is, and how like a nice, innocent gentlewoman she looks! One would not be ashamed to own her on the scaffold,' declared Miss Hopkins enthusiastically, 'and Lambert is with her, too; how proper and devoted of him! Don't you see her brother cannot look her in the face? Depend upon it, he was the culprit —though it is dreadful to think of it in a man of his antecedents, and she is here because she has shielded him.'

'It is she who ought not to be able to look him in the face. It is all the other way,' groaned Bennet desperately, for it was possible the voice of Miss Hopkins might be the voice of the public—that blundering British public as represented in Crowminster. For the very reason of the public's over stolid honesty, its resounding faith in the sacredness of its domestic institutions, and its hasty boisterous impulses, it was liable to blunder. It had a fine tableau presented for it to dwell upon in the little family group which, preceded by a female warder, entered the court and filed into the dock beside Jack.

Susie was there in the character of an injured sufferer. She had never appeared to better advantage than in that simple black silk and cashmere frock, with the little bonnet to match, the only point of colour about her being the dove-coloured bow which formed the sole trimming to the bonnet, and the dove-coloured strings which tied it demurely

under her chin. She looked lovely, patient, and pensive, a little flurried, but that was only to be expected. She glanced up and caught the eye of one of the lawyers who had dined at her table in Newton the last time the Assize was held at Crowminster, and made him a hesitating, deprecating bow. It was done with such a timid, disarming air, as if she would have said, 'I do not know the etiquette of this place—how should I? Forgive me if I do wrong. Perhaps a prisoner ought not to bow, and my friends may not care to acknowledge me under this dreadful cloud; but I can only act according to my own gently-bred, womanly instincts.'

There were many persons present who had not seen Mrs. Crabtree since the night of the volunteer ball. They thought her even more fascinating in the shade, drooping under the cruel stigma attached to her, than she had been in the light, in her season of triumph.

There was not much to be said for Lambert

Crabtree's looks. He appeared big, red, and goggle-eyed as ever-confident and hectoring as before. There was not even much to be said for the character of the bankrupt banker. His ways of doing business and of living had never, at the outset, recommended themselves to men of integrity. His sudden breakup, with its ruin to hundreds of his fellowcreatures, following hard on a long course of reckless expenditure, was only the biggest blot in a generally spotted and tarnished reputation. There was no other quality than that of doggedness shown in the manner in which he stalked after his wife. But when it was taken into consideration that he was a beaten man condemned to pay the penalty of his folly in having made ducks and drakes of a handsome inheritance; still more, that he was there in the prisoner's dock, in a public court, of his own choice—in fact, it was by favour that he, who was under no arrest and no accusation, was permitted to occupy a chair on the other

side of that which had been granted to his wife's weakness—the British heart softened and warmed to the man. He was there in the fulfilment of his conjugal vows, though he could have had little idea when he uttered them where they would lead him, or what they would exact from him.

There were some dissentient voices where this theory was concerned. There were sceptics —where are there not sceptics?—who alleged that Lambert Crabtree was not in the court of his own accord and to back his wife—at least not entirely so. These scorners had it that the Crown authorities had given Mr. Lambert Crabtree a quiet hint that they could not dispense with his company; they might want his presence before long. It was a mixture of insolent braggadocio and cunning policy on his part to put the best face on his compulsory attendance in court, and make it appear that it was in the interest of Mrs. Crabtree. As for the prosecution, the lawyers suffered him to

give what colour he liked to the proceedings, and did not choose to show their cards before the time, while Mrs. Crabtree's counsel of course turned the incident to her advantage.

But the main body of the audience was not of this mind. The British public has its vein of sentiment, genuine enough, if somewhat stereotyped and sugary. Lambert Crabtree was there as a proof of his trust in his wife, who had her brother on her other side, but that was not sufficient—he was her fellow-prisoner. It was for her husband, a free, unassailed man, to lend her his countenance still, to support his wife and the mother of his children, if he had a grain of affection for her or a spark of faith in her left. The man could not be a thoroughpaced bad fellow who fully confessed the obligation; and to judge by the manner in which Susie leant her light weight on her husband's broad shoulder, and glanced up with her starry eyes in his red face, the tie between the couple must be of the tenderest kind.

The spectacle moved many a susceptible, worthy heart. There was in truth no great need for what Bennet in her bitterness told herself was the sole element wanting to overcome the common sense of a gushing and gullible multitude, in the addition of one of 'the pledges' of Lambert and Susie Crabtree's 'wedded love' to make the tableau complete. After all, perhaps the presence of poor Molly and Piers, with their ungainly resemblance to their father, and their tiresome unruliness, was better in fancy than in fact.

The jury were sworn. The prisoners pleaded not guilty. The Crown prosecutor opened the case in a speech distinguished by its brevity and moderation. Evidence was led of the state in which Mr. Parsons and the junior clerks had found the bank when they opened it on the 20th of last June. The main-door of the bank and the door of communication between it and the Bank House were locked as usual, and presented their ordinary appearance;

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so did the managing partners' and clerks' desks. But on going to the safe it was found open, every separate lock had been unfastened and remained with the keys in them or lying as they had been thrown down and left on the floor. On further examination it was discovered that a private desk of Mr. Lambert Crabtree's had also been opened and stood with the key in the lock. It was in this desk he had been in the habit of keeping the various keys of the safe. He had not been accustomed to distribute them among several responsible clerks, according to the practice of many bankers. Mr. Parsons had a key, which had not been out of his possession, to the desk that usually contained the keys of the safe. The key found in the desk was either Mr. Lambert Crabtree's, or one similar to it.

The safe was not empty. It had the amount of gold entered in the bank books, and a quantity of the Crabtree Bank notes. But there had been taken from it a sum of 7000l. in

Bank of England notes, which Mr. Parsons deposed to have seen in its place the day before. The sum was above the average amount kept by a country bank which issued its own notes, but Mr. Lambert Crabtree was careful to provide against contingencies.

Mr. Parsons was asked whether there was not a particular parcel of bonds belonging to a client of the bank's which had been kept among papers of a similar description in a compartment of the safe.

At the mere mention of the bonds, a close observer, posted up in the evidence as Bennet was, believed she detected an alarmed flicker of Lambert Crabtree's heavy eyelids and an impatient rustle of Susie's dress, while Jack sat wholly unmoved.

Mr. Parsons, in answer to questions, declared that he was aware of the existence of the Mexican 3 per Cents. and the Peruvian Bonds, and that they had been lodged in the safe. But he had not thought of them or

missed them on the morning of the robbery. When his attention was called to them he was prepared to swear that to the best of his belief the bonds must have been withdrawn from the safe some time before. It was not necessary that he should receive any communication with regard to their withdrawal, and he had not received any. But he had been told by Mr. Lambert Crabtree to make a fresh list of documents of the kind in the possession of the bank about three months previous to the robbery, and it was his opinion that these Mexican and Peruvian bonds were not then in the safe. He would swear they were there six months before, when he had gone over them in helping to make up a statement of his yearly accounts for Major Coplestone, the owner of the bonds.

Mr. Parsons' disclosure with regard to the bonds excited some surprise in the court. His opinion was extracted from him not without difficulty—for he was a diffident, painfully-conscientious, elderly man—but no cross-question-

ing caused him to contradict himself on any material point. While this witness was under examination, Lambert Crabtree's eyelids fell farther, and he was guilty of the slightest possible shuffle of his feet, which was masked by a second baffled irritable movement from Susie

The police gave evidence of having been called to the bank at the instance of the banker's wife, in the absence of her husband. She went with them and showed them the safe and Mr. Lambert Crabtree's desk, which they found in the condition described by the clerks. There were no signs of violence within the bank or the Bank House, and externally none on the street side.

Mrs. Lambert Crabtree had volunteered a statement, which the head officer took down. Then followed the story with which Susie had made everybody she had come across familiar. She had been awakened by unwonted and suspicious noises. She had risen in terror, and

stolen out to the corridor into which her bedroom opened, when her fright and delicate health had got the better of her, and she had not been conscious of what was happening for a time. On her recovery, as she found all was still she had crept back to her room and bed, and slept till her usual hour of rising next morning.

In addition, Mrs. Lambert Crabtree had requested the police to accompany her to the garden. She had pointed out to them that the garden door was still locked and bolted, but that there was a ladder leaning against the lowest portion of the wall dividing the garden from that of the Rev. Edmund Ward-the vicar of the parish, whose garden door was often not bolted at night even during the fruit season. This piece of carelessness did a great deal to neutralise the precautions taken with regard to the outer wall of the Bank House garden. This had been purposely heightened for the security of the bank.

Mrs. Lambert Crabtree had also called the police's attention to the circumstance that the front windows of the Bank House, if one supposed negligence on the part of the servants as to shutters and bars, could be entered from without. She had farther reminded the guardians of the public, whom she had done her best to help in the discharge of their duty, that the Bank House had been recently in the hands of house painters, who, in the course of their work, had been all over the premises.

This part of the evidence, apart from its being shaped into questions and answers, was only got in jerky fragments, in consequence of the line pursued by Mrs. Lambert Crabtree's counsel, who tried hard to stop every second sentence as 'hearsay,' 'not admissible,' 'a breach of precedent, &c., &c.

Susie, with all her blandness, was not grateful to her lawyer for his fidelity to her cause. She looked provoked and bored when she was thus not allowed to claim, even by proxy, the

Court's sympathy in return for her courage, her sufferings, her seeking to put the police on the scent.

Susie grew very pale, however, and gave a startled, scared gasp. She ceased to rest on her husband; she sat bolt upright and listened with tingling ears as the imperturbable police officer went on with his evidence. He had examined the ladder, which was a very light one—light enough for a woman to lift to the spot on which it was planted. The spot was a garden-bed, newly dug and raked over, on which rain had fallen the previous night. The ends of the ladder merely rested on the earth, whereas if so much as a child's foot had pressed the rungs, the ends must have sunk half-an-inch in the soil, in the state in which it lay.

Thomas Wilkes, the gardener, was called to corroborate the policeman's testimony. He looked anywhere rather than at his mistress, when he said that the bed on which the ladder had been resting was one he had prepared for

young 'plants.' The ladder was the same he had used the previous afternoon for thinning the peaches on the end wall He had put the ladder in the garden tool-house when he had done work the evening before that of the robbery, and he swore he had locked the door and taken away the key. He had only reopened the door the following morning before breakfast, when he returned to his work finding both the tool-house door and the garden door locked as usual. When he left for breakfast he had not relocked the door, as it was not locked during the day. On his return immediately after breakfast, he had been too busy seeking to frighten the sparrows from the peas to notice that the ladder was removed; in fact, he had not gone near the tool-house. He had come back before nine, and he had remarked Mrs. Crabtree leaving the garden and running up the flight of steps which led from the garden to the house. He remembered the incident because it had made an impression

on him at the time. It was not her custom to be in the garden so early, and it had occurred to him she might have gone to look at some fuchsias she had wished taken into her jardinière, which he had not been able to attend to the day before. A little later he had left off work in order to go into the town to attend a sale of ironmongery, at which he expected to get some garden tools at reduced prices. Before starting he had locked the garden door on account of the new paint, though it was not customary to keep the door locked during the day, and left it in the condition in which it was found by the police.

In the course of Thomas Wilkes's examination Mrs. Lambert Crabtree recovered her composure. She did not flinch more than any woman unaccustomed to hear herself referred to in public, and constrained to listen to an unfavourable implication attached to her actions, might be excused for doing. On the contrary, she smiled faintly, and gave a slight

shake of her head, as of one who would say how little even respectable old servants are to be relied on! How their rank imaginations run away with the foolish, ignorant dreamers. and they talk themselves into the belief of the most improbable scenes which never occurred; especially if these scenes point to some grave offence on the part of the poor masters and mistresses.

The servants of the Bank House were called in turn. Most of them gave their evidence with uneasy earnestness, much as the bank clerks had given theirs, under the daunting sense of the burden of suspicion which rested alike on clerks and servants, till the robbery was brought home to the real culprit.

Roger, the man, had slept out of the house in his rooms above the stables, and had very little to say, except in sundry small details which confirmed the narrative of his fellowservants.

The women had slept in their rooms at the

top of the house, and had heard nothing during the night. They had been first aroused by the arrival of a washerwoman who was accustomed to come on each Wednesday morning as early as between four and five o'clock to assist the laundress. She was in the habit of ringing the hall-door bell, because Roger took away the key of the area door that he might let in his boy to scour the knives before he went to school, the family not being astir on other mornings much sooner than eight o'clock. On the morning when the bank robbery was discovered the servants had been sleeping soundly. They had been kept late out of bed the night before by work connected with the volunteer ball, over which Mrs. Crabtree had presided. They had not heard the ringing of the washerwoman, until she had tried flinging up a handful of gravel, which had hit the window of one of the maids' rooms. The maid who descended to let in the applicant had been put about by finding that the key

of the hall-door was not on the nail where it usually hung. She had sought for it in vain, and had summoned her fellow-servants to help her in the search without effect. In the end she and another maid-servant owned to having admitted the washerwoman by the window of the laundry, which was on the ground-floor. But they solemnly swore, as did-an older and more confidential servant, that to their knowledge this window and every other window in the house had been closed and the shutters fastened over night, and that after the admission of the washerwoman the window was again shut, with the shutters bolted, and was only reopened late in the morning.

Ann Smith, the washerwoman, was in Newton Infirmary labouring under congestion of the lungs, and could not appear in court; but she had been able to make a declaration which corresponded in every important particular with the statement of the servants.

The housemaid gave evidence that Mr.

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John Prior had slept in the walnut-wood bedroom for two nights-having arrived late on the evening before the volunteer ball, and staying till the morning after it, which was also the morning after the bank robbery. During the interval he had scarcely quitted the house. He had not attended the ball, and on the following morning he had left so early that he had gone without his breakfast. He had come into the dining-room before the servant was done cleaning it, and had given her a couple of half-crowns and a verbal message to her mistress, to be delivered when Mrs. Crabtree got up, that he was gone to Oxford. Sarah Roberts had offered to prepare breakfast for him, but he had declined to wait for it. He had seemed restless and eager to set out. He was just gone when Mrs. Crabtree came into the room—much before her ordinary time—and expressed surprise that her brother had left so early, but added that he had no doubt expected her to sleep late on the morning after a ball. Three hours later, after the robbery at the bank had been discovered and the police were in the house, the same girl went to 'do' the room in which Mr. John Prior had slept. When she was moving the dressing-glass in order to dust it, she found beneath the stand, as if it had been thrust in there and forgotten, the missing key of the hall door and another key which she did not know so well—but she was told—no, she must not repeat anything she had been told. She took the keys to a fellow-servant, and finally they were given up to the police.

An officer of the force spoke to receiving the keys from the servants, and proved that the one key was that of the hall-door, and the other the key of the door of communication between the bank and the Bank House.

At the announcement of the keys found pushed out of sight in the room that Jack Prior had occupied, which produced a manifest sensation in the court, Bennet Gray half rose

to her feet regardless of all around her, and bent forward to look at Jack with a last piteous appeal.

But he would not meet her eye, his face was set more desperately than her own, with a hopeless obduracy which seemed the only feeling that was left in him.

Miss Hopkins was plucking at Bennet's sleeve. 'Did I not tell you he had done it? The hardened young scoundrel, he has not his ugly face for nothing. Poor dear Mrs. Lambert has sacrificed herself to conceal his guilt in vain. See, see! We must get to her,' went on Miss Hopkins excitedly. 'We must tear our way through if necessary. No judge can have the heart to prevent us. Can't you tell she's going to faint, the tender-hearted soul!'

And Susie did look ghastly for a second, and smelt nervously at a scent-bottle, while the full odium of the crime fell on Jack.

But Bennet clutched at Miss Hopkins's mantle and held her down, addressing her in

a manner which must have struck the elderly partisan as shockingly unfeeling. 'Sit still, Miss Hopkins. She will not faint.'

Neither did Susie faint. She pulled herself together with steel-like tenacity, as she had done before. She went out for luncheon when she was allowed, in company with her husband and Jack, and their body guard of turnkey and warder, after the example of the judges and lawyers and those of the audience who could vacate their seats with any chance of being able to resume them.

Susie came back delicately refreshed—at least she could listen with quiet attention, and without a sign of self-consciousness, when several members of the police were brought back to describe the recovery of the Bank of England notes which had been taken from the safe. At the suggestion of the London detectives, the police had instituted a strict search over the Bank House and adjoining premises.

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In the course of that night and the following morning the men found one roll of the missing notes in the water-butt, and another stitched into the mattress of Mrs. Lambert Crabtree's bed.

The last piece of information made a greater impression than any that had gone before it, but Susie heard it proclaimed without doing more than open wide her great dark eyes and close firmly her small red mouth. Jack started, and turned and gazed at her as if to demand if it were all over with her and his selfdestruction was useless. Lambert Crabtree's red face waxed purple, until one could fancy his teeth chattering with cold. Susie, the fragile, clinging creature, torn with conflicting emotion, was, nevertheless, when she chose to summon up her courage, the most indomitable spirit of the three. She did not so much as wince when the witness swore to finding silk in Mrs. Crabtree's work-basket in her room that matched exactly the silk with which

the rip in the seam of the mattress had been re-sewed.

The third roll and last of the notes had been picked up in the street, where it might have been thrown from one of the drawing-room windows of the Bank House. The little packet had been secured by an early and lucky wayfarer. His luck, however, went no farther than the necessity of carrying the treasure, within twenty-four hours, to the police station, in a panic, lest the fifty-pound notes should be discovered in the possession of the finder, and he should be taken up as accessory to the bank robbery before he could explain how he came by the compromising money.

The Court's working day closed at this stage of the proceedings, with the case for the prosecution not completed, and with agitating rumours circulating freely. It was said that there was still more fatal evidence behind to be brought forward at the last. The desperate motive that could alone account for so daring

and reckless a crime would be supplied, with proof given which would seriously implicate another person who had till now been at liberty.

Common rumour, surely, was scarcely wanted to crush hope in the hearts of the prisoners and their friends. Guilty or innocent, their case looked nearly as bad as it could be. 'If that fine lady and her brother get off, they will have rubbed shoulders with the hulks,' was the dictum of an old judge accustomed to use out-of-date forms of speech, and by no means distinguished for prophesying smooth things.

Bennet was to return to Redcot by herself. The holding in abeyance of her real relations with the Priors, on which she had been bent, afforded her no apology, even in the eyes of Miss Hopkins, for trying to stay over the night in Crowminster and seeking to obtain an interview with Jack. Besides, Bennet had promised to carry the news to Redcot.

Mat Crabtree could not go back with Bennet. He was remaining with Miss Hopkins in the Assize town on the plea of being ready if he were needed. He saw Bennet off, after charging her with the most hopeful messages he could manufacture for John Prior. Mat wrung her hand and looked into her downcast face with his own so careworn, it was with difficulty she could realise that it was the cheery scholar and squire of Haybridge who was speaking to her.

'To say that I am sorry for you, Miss Gray, is superfluous, almost impertinently so, but you know it, and I have something to ask of you. Will you tell Jane that if I cannot save both her brother and sister I will make a last fight for Jack? Good Lord! the lad must be rescued, even if the choice should lie between him and Lambert,' Mat Crabtree exclaimed sternly.

Then Bennet knew that Mat Crabtree was

a righteous man—that though his own name, his own flesh and blood, were to be sacrificed, if it rested with him to make or withhold the sacrifice he would make it for truth and justice's sake.

CHAPTER XIX.

BENNET'S DECLARATION.

AT Redcot the dreary summer day wore heavily away. The servants moved stealthily and spoke in whispers, a form of respect which served as a useful check on their violent excitement. The children crept about, daunted by the nameless oppression. Ally tried hard to get at the bottom of the something wrong. She succeeded at last, through the most zealous scandal-monger among the servants who had the heart to seek to break Miss Ally's proud spirit, and rout her saucy airs by the thunder-clap of a tale which overwhelmed even a child.

'It is your uncle and your aunt, my pretty dear, as is being tried this blessed day for breaking open Crabtree's Bank at Newton. No, not for high treason or highway robbery, Miss Ally. What do put such nonsense into the child's head? And they ain't going to be beheaded, or hanged, or even sent beyond the seas; for, you see, they're gentlefolks, and there's one law for the rich and another for the poor—the better for the rich, Miss Ally. So you needn't go for to sob and cry and bring me into trouble after you've plagued me with questions the whole of this here morning. The worst that can happen is that your uncle and aunt may be locked up a goodish while, so that you mayn't see them again till you're a big lady; but you'll be gone to your own papa in India by that time, so you needn't take on so.'

Even Tommy slunk about with his tail between his legs. Or he would sometimes put up his shaggy forepaws on his old mistress's knee to attract her notice. Then he would give his moulted plume of a tail a beseeching

little wag, and raise his hoary, towsy head—the eyes invisible, but the tip of his pink tongue propelled with a quiver, in his ardent desire to lick her hands and face, so to assure her of his heartfelt sympathy if she would but let him.

For the most part, John Prior shut himself up with his gnawing anxiety and sore humiliation, or wandered out aimlessly, keeping close to the house that he might avoid any encounter, even with his servants, which he could help. Latterly it had seemed as if he were seeking to walk his troubles down, for he was on his feet and abroad twelve hours out of the twentyfour. His wife, delicate as she was, underwent the fatigue with him. She had taken to volunteering her companionship as she had volunteered it in the early days of their married life, and, though he had not invited, neither had he refused the association. might be, as she trusted, that he took a dumb solace from her silent sympathy.

But to-day he rejected all companionship, even from his fellow-sufferers, as he paced up and down the avenue or in and out of the shrubbery, past the disused barn and mill. They had been converted into picturesque objects by dint of Time's tooth and such convenient accessories as ivy and bats, but the buildings had never wanted a certain air of abandonment and forlornness in the happiest circumstances. It was the same with the forsaken, overgrown quarry, in which he could not linger for a moment to-day. It was full of voices for him, children's chatter; the echo of a gun with a boy's shout of delight; Jack's tones altogether altered—low and upbraiding; Susie's, lying in every shrill cadence whether she mocked or lamented—how did it come that his daughter, her mother's daughter, was a liar? Lambert Crabtree's jeering, taunting accents; the murmur of a crowd; the blatant pleading of an advocate, the solemn utterance of a judge delivering sentence.

When these torturing sounds filled his ears and fretted his soul to distraction, it was a small matter that the Ladslove meadows lay in profound tranquillity, his secret buried in their bosom, under the slanting rays of the sinking sun.

Mrs. Prior and Jane kept together, as most women will in such straits. They were faintly soothed by yielding to the gregarious impulse which came out in Jane when she was tried, as it might have done in the most frivolous of the sisterhood.

The mother and daughter were generally in the drawing-room, whose out-of-date gilded and glassy splendour had been got up by a Prior of Redcot in anticipation of his being named master of the foxhounds for the county. The faded garishness now distinguished a scene in which the sickness of hope deferred was not for the attainment or loss of a trivial ambition, but in the dread earnest and hard reality of waiting for a verdict in the unutter-

able humiliation of a criminal trial. It did not even imply the ghastly dignity of a murder, merely the coarse vulgarity and gross stupidity of a theft. Sometimes Mrs. Prior went softly away to her own room, and Jane knew that the simple old-fashioned mother had gone to pray for her children in jeopardy, though, perhaps, hardly in such deadly peril as they had passed through when she knew nothing of it. The daughter, wise in ancient and modern philosophy, knew nothing better to do than to slip from her chair, bow her head, cover her face, and follow her mother's example.

In truth, save for that refuge to which One had recourse in His agony, till He could arise and do the will of His Father—but for that 'Our Father' He taught His brethren, the piteous figure drawn by the reverent old artist, the grand winged woman 'Melancholy,' crouched down hopeless among the most magnificent discoveries of science and the noblest

sallies of intellect, must represent the creed of the world now and for evermore.

Sometimes Mrs. Prior would take up her quilt and begin to sew at it mechanically.

Then Jane would rise restlessly, stand before her mother, and put out imperious hands to take the work away. 'How can you, mother? How will you bear to look at that embroidery again?' she would say, with a wondering shudder.

Mrs. Prior would let the work fall in deference to her daughter's objections, and yet would look up at her with a gently reproachful reminder. 'How can I?' she would echo; 'how shall I bear to look again at the work I have been busy about so long, after I have taken it into my hands to-day? My dear, I think I can, because God made me and it, and does all things well, and will show me what I cannot understand, one day, if I wait. I knew a good man who, when dying young, said to the wife whom he dearly loved, who was

breaking her heart over their early earthly separation, "I can believe the time will come when we shall count this day happy."'

At another time Jane could do no more than pluck at her mother's gown as she, the grown woman, had done when she was a little child, and, 'with no language save a cry,' utter that last appeal for help, 'Mother! mother!' which sounded, alas, so useless to-day.

But the mother could have told how pathetically sweet to her this return to her for aid was. She responded to it promptly and patiently, not asking for help herself, not caring though her need—which might well have been reckoned the greatest—was forgotten. She was comforted by the mere act of spending herself for her children, as she would have spent herself for her husband. 'Yes, my darling, I am here. It will not be long till we hear more. Think of your poor father, and bear up for his sake,' and she fondly

stroked the head leaning against her, for it was her little Janie come back to her again.

'But think of it,' persisted Jane. 'Jack and Susie tried as thieves.'

'We must submit. It is God's will,' said Mrs. Prior with pale, loyal lips.

'Mother,' whispered Jane almost inaudibly, 'can they be guilty? You know how Susie would have her own way. You know how she was persuaded from her earliest days that everything and everybody belonged to her in a fashion, to serve her purpose; how she was morally blind to their independent rights, whenever hers and theirs clashed.'

Mrs. Prior could not restrain a groan. 'But she was a wife and mother, Jane,' she protested desperately, as if the argument was well-nigh irresistible. 'She must have known that such a crime, though it might have been a temporary service, would in the end be a fatal injury to Lambert Crabtree — the cruellest wrong to

their children, as well as a breach of the laws both of God and man.'

'And Jack,' went on Jane, not following the course of her mother's reasoning. 'He was fond of Susie. She used to lead him a good deal. He was apt to look at things in a thoughtless, boyish light, as so much sport. She may have played upon him to regard the matter as something of a joke. She might convince him, and be convinced herself, poor, wretched Susie! that Lambert Crabtree could and would replace the money without loss of time. She may have told Jack it was only a kind of lark which had so much good in it that it would enable her husband to tide over a money difficulty. Then, after Jack and she had hoaxed the authorities, as they often played mischievous tricks here long ago, and raised a hue and cry about nothing, there would be another hue and cry when the bank-notes turned up just where they had disappeared in the safe, for Jack and she would manage to put the paper back—no fear, and the masquerading burglars would have a laugh in their sleeves.'

'No, never, Jane,' said Mrs. Prior with determination. 'Your brother is not a baby or a fool. You have not done him justice. He has long outgrown such follies. To tamper with either public or private property which was none of his, perhaps to bring innocent people under suspicion and disgrace, could never have been Jack's doing.'

'It is hard upon Mat Crabtree,' said Jane, with a long heavy sigh, after a pause. 'His honourable name is dragged through the mire. The bank which his grandfather founded and his father did so much for, is irretrievably ruined—a calamity that will be talked of for half a century as "the failure of Crabtree's Bank." So will the consequent blight on the neighbourhood, even without the horrid addition of the bank robbery at the hands of Mrs. Lambert Crabtree and her brother. Mat Crabtree may well rue the day that our families

became connected. He will have little cause to think kindly of us in the future.'

'Mat Crabtree is a good man and will judge fairly,' answered Mrs. Prior. Then a little flicker of a smile played for a second about her mouth. 'Of course that fancy about him and Miss Gray was an absurd mistake. He was in her confidence and knew of her engagement to Jack almost from the first. The last sign of his giving us up was his turning back when he was here yesterday, and claiming my ear to tell me, as if I required to be told! "Take care of Jane—don't let her worry too much over this idiotic trial."

Jane said no more of Mat Crabtree's desertion of Redcot. A blush as wavering as her mother's smile stole for an instant the wanness from her face.

The dusk was beginning to fall on the poor family, at last all huddled about the darkening drawing-room window, which commanded the carriage drive. John Prior was in the central arm-chair, his wife was seated a little behind him. She had one fine, thin hand on the back of his chair, and he permitted the hand to lie there, though he could not have been unconscious of its presence, seeing that more than once he rested his own gaunt hand for an instant on the other. Jane was opposite, declining to sit, her young limbs braced till they were like iron under the necessity of standing by the hour, where she could see and hear the farthest.

These were by no means the only watchers. There were loiterers along the road, some of them colliers from Kershaw in their upperworld fustians. There was a party of people in the lodge, and the house servants were gathered about the lower doors and windows more or less openly. For there was not wanting a rough notion that if 'Miss Susie that was' and Mr. Jack 'got off,' there should be a welcome home, containing at least an element of triumph and rejoicing. These rash anticipators

were not so silent that the eager clack of their tongues did not strike painfully at intervals on the quiet trio in the drawing-room.

The window was open, everybody agreeing that the evening was warm; but the true explanation was, that even if darkness set in the tramp of the horse's feet would still be heard coming up the avenue. All hope had long been relinquished that the trial would prove a mere form and be quashed at an early stage. It must have been dragging on through the long hours that seemed a very life-time to the family at Redcot. The question was, What were they waiting for? Had the end come on the first day? Could what appeared the interminable delay be bringing back Susie and Jack, released, if not vindicated, to their friends?

Before it was too late to distinguish a carriage, there was a little half-stifled cry, 'There she is!' as first the regular beat of a horse's feet broke upon the stillness, and

then the Redcot phaeton with its solitary occupant came in sight, approaching nearer and nearer. No Susie, no Jack, not even Mat Crabtree; only she, bringing the news as she had promised. The father, and mother, and sister sat spell-bound. They could not call out; they could only look at each other with protesting eyes. That strange paralysis which often attends on the chief crisis in a life had befallen the Priors. They saw and heard the phaeton stop, and Bennet Gray alight. They knew she was running the gauntlet of the servants' inquiring eyes, even of their irrestrainable tongues, as she must have run similar gauntlets more than once on the road. The breathless listeners heard the foot on the stairs, but no one ran out to meet and greet Bennet, and charge her to tell how the trial had gone.

She came in bare-headed and bare-handed. She had pulled off her gloves and taken off her hat as she mounted the stairs in her hurry. Her brown hair was crushed and disordered by the long pressure of her hat, her face was flushed. She looked younger than they had ever seen her—quite girlish—as she returned thus solitary and unsupported from her expedition. She walked past Jane and John Prior—who had started to his feet, straight to Mrs. Prior, with whom Miss Gray had held none but the most perfunctory intercourse for a number of weeks, took the elder woman in her arms and kissed her. Then they all knew it had gone ill with Jack and Susie.

Mrs. Prior did not resist, neither did she return the embrace. She said, with dry lips, 'He is found guilty?'

'Oh, no! it is not so bad as that,' said Bennet, coming to herself and proceeding to tell them the whole truth before she delivered Mat Crabtree's messages. She sat down among them, and would not listen to any word of rest or refreshment. She did not want it; she had more to say. She spoke in a solemn resolute way, as of one who had to make a confession like that made on a death-bed. 'If it come to the worst, I'll wait till his sentence is fulfilled, and the first day he is free I will marry the man who sought me when I was a poor governess. I was not playing at teaching then—I was in sober, sometimes sad enough earnest, working for my bread, alone in the world.'

'Where was it?' asked a voice. 'How did Jack come to know you?'

'It was in Berkshire. He was visiting there—in the very family where they made me feel neither a guest nor a friend, but that did not matter to him.'

'And it was there Mat Crabtree saw you?' said Jane.

'Yes. The meeting made an impression upon him, because the news had just come that I had succeeded unexpectedly to the fortune of the great chancery lawyer, my father's cousin. People talked of it—called

me "the fortunate Miss Gray," the speaker's lip quivered, 'and I daresay pointed me out to strangers. But Jack was gone before then; he knew nothing of the change in my fortunes. I had tried him, too. We have all been hard on Jack—all, except his mother here, who has not looked at me since she knew I deceived her, and she was right.'

'Hush! hush! child,' said Mrs. Prior falteringly. 'Say no more, since Jack loves you—and you love him—I believe that now.'

'Yes, but wait till you hear more. I refused to engage myself to him while I was still poor. I had to think and act for myself—I had learned to do it. I distrusted his strength and constancy. I distrusted his friends and their influence over him. He was among bad companions—bad, I mean, for him—idle, pleasure-loving men of the world. I said if he would have me marry him he must break off from old habits and associates, and the result was his voyage to Australia. He went there

to see if we could go out as settlers, even though he were to break with Redcot—do you hear that? But he would not have lost sight of his mother. He had hardly been gone when Josh Gray, who had been kind to my father, while he had taken no notice of his family after his death, died in his turn, and I was next of kin.'

'But did you not write to Jack?' asked two of her listeners simultaneously.

'I had written in order that he might hear from me on landing, and I could not write again till he sent me his address, for he was to go up the country without loss of time and try if he could find an opening. In the meantime Jane wrote to the head of an old school of mine in search of a governess for Ally and her brothers, so that the application came round to me. I was of age. I was my own mistress; nobody had any right to control me. I longed to see what you were all like without your knowing what I was to Jack. I was tempted

to make an experiment, and to judge for myself with regard to Jack Prior's family and his relations to them. It was silly and wrong, though I never meant to harm any of you—I meant only to do you good. All the same,' shaking her head and discussing her past actions with grave impartiality, 'I had no right to impose on you.'

'Could you not have confided in us from the beginning?' urged Mrs. Prior in selfdefence.

'What! proposed to bribe you to receive and like me; resolved to come alone to you with the tale before you had heard of our engagement, or he had heard of my fortune—no, I could not have done that. I did write from Redcot after I heard from Jack, but he missed the letter. He never knew what windfall had come to us—till—till he was ready to renounce it all. But now,' hurrying on, to save herself from breaking down, 'I have judged—I know everything I hope you will forgive my decep-

tion and be friends with me at last, for I have made up my mind. I will never forsake Jack Prior in his adversity. If it is any consolation to you to hear, you do hear that a woman who loves him, and is rich in this world's goods, will stand by him through everything, and save him if it be in human power to save him.'

'Oh, Bennet, his Bennet, God for ever bless you! It is I who have been blind in my wicked jealousy; it is you who must forgive me,' cried the poor mother, falling upon the girl's neck to weep there.

But John Prior rose feebly and protested, as he had protested before, only more tenderly. It cannot be, my dear, you are young, you are carried away by your feelings at this moment; you do not know what you are saying or what you are undertaking. When you are older and wiser you will understand better. Neither Jack nor anyone else could consent to such a terrible sacrifice.'

But she would have her way. 'You and

he must and will consent.' She reminded him of an Englishman of rank and repute who had fallen from his high estate, fallen by his own dishonest deed, and of an English lady in his circle, his contemporary in rank and in age —which was not that of impulsive youth, but of sober, reasonable middle-age—to whom he had been engaged in marriage. She had heard when his sentence was passed, she knew that he had crossed the seas as a convict; and the moment she could follow she had gone to him and kept her engagement by becoming his wife. The thing was no secret, and, though England was a nation of shopkeepers, it had not cried shame on the woman for her tender forgiveness and generous fidelity. Not that the cases were parallel, Bennet had only quoted this as an extreme example. She had nothing to forgive. Jack was innocent. Everyone who knew him, and many who did not know him, had sufficient fairness and judgment to recognise that.

It was clear that Bennet was in an over-

wrought state, with which nobody could very well cope. At last Mrs. Prior, who had begun to wait upon her, got her to eat something and to go to her room, on the plea that if she did not take food and try to sleep she would not be able to return to Crowminster and be in the court next day. Even then, as they passed the door of the nursery, and heard Ally still chattering, Miss Gray would go in to kiss the children and bid them good-night. And when sleepy Sam mumbled 'Good-night, Miss Gray,' she confided to the stupefied child and his electrified nurse—her own eyes shining like stars as she spoke, 'I am not going to be Miss Gray always, Sam. I am going to be "Aunt Bennet;" won't you like that, my boy?'

'But you ain't our aunt,' objected Ally.
'Whatever we may like, we have only Aunt
Jane and Aunt Susie, besides Aunt Wood,
whom you never saw. But, oh, do tell me,
Miss Gray, is Aunt Susie locked up with

Uncle Jack, and fed on bread and water? How can Uncle Jack let her? It is naughty of him.'

'And you, too, Ally!' said Bennet, bitterly.

'Pretty Auntie Susie!' cooed Sam, 'Molly and Piers' mamma, who kisses them and gives them sweets, and sends them out of her way. Are you going to be like Aunt Susie?'

Bennet turned away with a shudder.

In her own room, where Mrs. Prior still followed her, Bennet broke down and sobbed passionately. 'Oh! dear Mrs. Prior,' she said between her sobs, 'he is your Jack as well as mine. You have known and understood him since he was a baby. Do you believe he will survive the shame and misery? He may die in the midst of it; for if it come at all it will last for long years. If we live to be together again it cannot be until our unhappy youth is past. I feel driven to wish that he had forfeited his bail, fled and been outlawed, though I

scouted the suggestion when somebody made it only this morning,' she said wistfully.

'No,' denied Mrs. Prior staunchly, 'a true man should act as Jack has acted.'

'I used to have such horrid dreams of storms and shipwrecks, after I sent him to Australia,' said Bennet again. 'I knew I should never be at peace till I had him back. Yet I have lived well-nigh to own that it would have been well for him and all who loved him if he had been washed overboard some wild dark night, and perished, while the world was still bright to him, and his faith in God and man unshaken.'

Mrs. Prior bade the girl remember that Jack had still something to look forward to and live for even when life was hardest, though he should be cut off from his family and Redcot for many a day. And this was supposing there were found a judge and jury who could condemn an innocent man. As for time, it was passing continually, moment by moment,

wearing away, whether in joy or sorrow, without sign or perception on man's part, till time itself should be no more by the decree of Him with whom a thousand years were as one day. And if we were poor creatures of a day, we were all the more in His hands who not only told the number of the stars, but bound up the broken in heart. Mrs. Prior dried Bennet's tears, and, in spite of all protest, undressed the girl with Jack's mother's own hands, and kissed and blessed her, for she had taken her daughter to her heart in their extremity, and surely the fulness of the reconciliation and the extent of the adoption were thrice welcome to both, even in the sorest hours of their lives. At last, when she could minister no more to Bennet or any other she loved, the mother was at liberty to mourn for her young son, her only son, in the depths of her heart.

CHAPTER X.

THE SECOND DAY OF THE TRIAL.

Bennet knew from previous information, before she went to Crowminster the next day, what the further theory of the prosecution would be. The lawyers would seek to establish, and would have considerable materials to their hand, that the South American bonds belonging to Major Coplestone which had not been recovered were not taken along with the Bank of England notes from the safe. They had been removed, as Parsons held, some time before, with an irresistible presumption that they had been withdrawn for the purpose of money being raised upon them by the person who took them. He could represent himself as the agent

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for the owner, acting for him as the banker had the power to act in the transaction. The near prospect of the return of Major Coplestone had rendered it absolutely necessary, in order to prevent exposure, that the pledged bonds should be redeemed at any cost. Other resources having failed, the desperate step was resorted to of the robbery of the bank, professedly in the absence of the banker, by his wife, backed by the active assistance or passive connivance of her brother. Independent witnesses would be called to show that when, according to the statement of Mr. and Mrs. Crabtree, he had left the volunteer ball, in order to take the last train to London, and ought to have been many miles from Newton, he was seen, between three and four o'clock on the morning of June 20—the morning of the day when the robbery was discovered waiting in the shadow of the trees overhanging Mr. Lewis's garden wall, on the opposite side of the way from the Bank House. Had the

theft been successfully carried out, and the bank-notes conveyed to the accomplice without by 'the woman' or 'the man' within, it would have been quite possible for Lambert Crabtree, if he had been in the streets of Newton that morning, as was represented, to travel by the earliest train to town, and, before the robbery was known and the circulation of the notes stopped, to pay in the money and recover the bonds. As to the business men who might hold the bonds in pledge, it was well known there were shady firms that entered into such doubtful transactions, and would not inquire too closely either in reference to the bonds or to the money. Even when suspicions were roused, even when losses were incurred, such gentlemen were generally silent for their own sake, not to spoil their own little game. So much was presumptive.

On the other hand, the conclusion was inevitable that whoever were the depredators they were stopped in their work, and scared 196

by the appearance of so humble an instrument of detection as the washerwoman on the scene. The fact that Ann Smith came in the regular course of her duty, and that her presence at so early an hour was a weekly occurrence at the Bank House, had been overlooked by one of those simple stupid blunders that frequently disarm, as if by the interposition of Providence, the elaborate precautions of the most skilful and daring of criminals. It was not pretended that these were skilful burglars, but skilled or not, they must have found themselves baffled in the attempt, and called upon to come to an immediate decision with regard to the disposal of the bank-notes taken from the safe without an opportunity to return them after the house was awake and aroused. Accordingly, some of the money was dropped into the water-butt, some was stitched into the mattress of Mrs. Crabtree's bed, and the rest was tossed from the window into the street below, without reaching the watcher on the other side of the

road, who had doubtless taken the alarm and made off at the noise made by the washerwoman.

In like manner the keys of the hall door and of the door of communication with the bank, which had been secured by the persons engaged in the robbery, could not be returned to their accustomed places, and had been found thrust under the stand of a looking-glass in a bedroom in the Bank House. That bedroom had been occupied over night and during the previous night by Mr. John Prior, who had vacated the room early on the following morning, when he had not waited for breakfast, before starting on a journey of several hours. Yet he had been apparently at a loss how to dispose of his time quite recently, since he had loitered for two days and nights at his sister's house without going to his home, which was within a walk or a ride, after his return from a protracted absence. This indifference might or might not be explained by the fact that, as

it was well known, he was on bad terms with his father, the squire of Redcot. There had been no plea of the young man's attendance at the volunteer ball to account for his stay at Newton. His going to the ball might have implied his going home first. Certainly he had not gone to the ball, and it had seemed as if he did not care to be seen during his stay at the Bank House.

Mrs. Crabtree had been as early a riser as her brother on this particular morning, according to the evidence of the housemaid and gardener, though the practice was not in accordance with her usual habits, and was not to be looked for, as she had herself remarked, on the day after a ball.

Bennet had learned all this argument long before it was to be delivered from the report of Jack Prior's lawyer. She suspected that there was an additional influence at work. She felt that the course of the case the previous day, and the particulars it had brought to light, had revived in full the excitement of the time of the robbery and the failure. It had renewed all the animus against the Lambert Crabtrees which had taken the place of their popularity, and was virulent and widespread in proportion to what had been the strength and extent of the opposite feeling. Bennet was sure that the assize town was ringing with stories comparatively fresh there of her extravagance and his irregularities and vices. Among the husband and wife's old admirers and worshippers there were doubtless few indeed who at that moment did not secretly blush for having been gulled by the pair, and were not inclined to protest against the tools ever having been really taken in or capable of entertaining the least sentiment of sincere regard for their victimisers. It was with such a couple that Jack Prior must stand or fall.

Bennet, in her comparative ignorance of legal rules, had a haunting dread that Lambert

Crabtree might have been arrested in the middle of the case, and might now sit with Susie and Jack in the dock—not as a devoted husband countenancing his aspersed wife, but as a fellow-prisoner, the guiltiest of the three. The dread was not confirmed by the note which was handed to her from Mat Crabtree, containing only the words 'nothing new,' or by any knowledge which could be imparted by Miss Hopkins, by whom Bennet again had a seat.

But Lambert Crabtree did not come in with his wife as he had come yesterday. She entered alone, save for Jack and the officials, and, while her brother's bearing was little altered, the strange, shrunk, aged look, which had been more than once before remarked in Susie, had come over her again. The great eyes were dilated as with fright and anguish—like those of a creature at bay. There were dark lines underneath the eyes. The rich colour was altogether fled, and had left a

sallow olive in its place. Her very lips looked bloodless and dry—the gliding, tripping walk was exchanged for a stumbling half run as of a hunted fugitive. Bennet glanced once towards Susie, and could not bear to look twice. She had not been five minutes in the box, when a loud, regardless 'Oh, I say!' from Jack, as he tried to reach his sister, and a quick movement on the part of the experienced female warder, who caught the sinking figure in her arms, showed that Susie had fainted outright.

Miss Hopkins, though she screamed, was too much overpowered by her own feelings to do more, far less to 'tear' through the crowd, as she had proposed, to the aid of her niece by marriage. Happily there was no occasion. Though deprived of the support of her husband, Mrs. Lambert Crabtree's womanly weakness was treated with every consideration. Judges, jury, audience were ready to wait, even to hang breathless on her recovery.

Indeed, Susie's fainting fit was one of those

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extraordinary turning points, contrary ebbs of the current, and strong reactions, which sway and master popular emotion, and are not uninfluential in directing the very course of law and justice. It was something undreamt of and marvellous to Bennet Gray to note the change that came over the spirit of the scene, even before the conviction grew and matured—not that Lambert Crabtree was arrested, but that overnight, without the knowledge of the authorities and of his brother, the ex-banker had quitted the town, and was hastening to quit the country, never to return.

How it happened exactly Bennet could never say. She was told that, even in the most favourable circumstances, Lambert Crabtree, though he had not been accused either as a principal or an accessory in the robbery, and was at liberty both before and during the trial, ought to have been under the surveillance of the Crown lawyers. He should have been detained by them till the end of the case in which

his wife was tried, which concerned him so nearly. Bennet was never sure whether there had been culpable negligence or connivance advisedly on the part of the prosecution; whether, as in more illustrious instances, there had been a painful puzzle what was to be done with the 'high-class misdemeanant,' according to Miss Hopkins's definition. Or there might have been a vague, illogical, not strictly moral, yet common-sense, idea that, as the Bank of England notes had been recovered and Crabtree's Bank had ceased to exist, enough had been done to vindicate the outraged majesty of the law without pushing matters to the last extremity. Such unacknowledged anomalies and 'uncovenanted mercies' are not absolutely unknown even in countries with model Governments. It was by a happy precaution providing for such contingencies that not one of the 'gentlemen of the jury' was a shareholder, or so much as a depositor, in the unfortunate Crabtree's Bank, when the greatest victim of Lambert Crabtree's dishonesty sat before them with her fate to be weighed in Justice's scales.

For it was not to be believed that Mrs. Lambert Crabtree, the pretty, delicate little creature on whom one day in court had worked such a grievous change, who was fainting with the terror and disgrace of her position before the eyes of the jury—could have robbed the bank except at her husband's instigation. Yet here was she left to pay the penalty. Her deserted, miserable situation tugged more and more at the hearts of men learned and men unlearned in the law, who did not appear to waste a thought on the possible betrayal and self-abandonment of Jack Prior, sitting by his sister, in his honest, manly ugliness, more pathetic to those who could appreciate it than Susie's beauty.

A quick sense of the turning of the scales caused a gleam of hope to flash across Bennet's mind. She was roused to hail fresh marvels.

The counsel for the prosecution was ending

his case with a nameless languor, against which he was powerless to struggle. It was bred by the vivid comprehension of a transfer of men's sympathies, which were now ranged on the opposite side.

Susie, restored to consciousness, was recognising with a swiftness of intuition that had genius in it, the transformation. She saw what the opportunity was to which she must rise, and how she must adapt herself to the new standard presented to her. She was no longer the innocent victim—she was the repentant transgressor—a touching sacrifice so complete that it was well-nigh heroic to a mistaken sense of the obedience required from a wife. She was no longer rendered calm and fearless by her husband's presence. She was bathed in tears. It could be plainly seen, since her bonnet had been removed in her faintness. that her silken hair was straying disregarded and dishevelled about her weeping eyes, like that of a Magdalene.

How could men fail to be moved to the core of their hearts by such a spectacle? How could they resist the desperate inclination to do something to redress the cruel wrong inflicted by a brother man? How could they avoid taking into account every jot and tittle in her favour—her social position, her former popularity, her winsome personal attractions, her present forlornness, each lapse and flaw in the chain of proof? All were to be eagerly remembered, seized, and acted upon by every man who had a heart in his bosom.

The counsel for the defence marshalled his witnesses and arranged his points with renewed hope and spirit. He indicated delicately, but forcibly, the respectable standing and high character of the Crabtree and Prior families, with the great improbability that their ranks would supply common criminals. He had no difficulty in bringing witnesses to show that the Bank House had lately been full of workmen, the cupidity of any one of whom might

have been excited, and those workmen had not all been Newton men, well known in the place; some of them had been strangers, brought down from London to execute the more delicate parts of the commission.

Stress was laid on the fact that the night or morning of the robbery was the night of the volunteer ball, and the morning after it when the town, and especially the railway station, were in a state of confusion, and little attention would be paid to arrivals and departures. It was hardly worth calling witnesses to show it could only be by an extraordinary strain put on the circumstance that a purely domestic incident so simple and natural as the cursory visit of a brother to his sister on the return of the gentleman from a voyage to Australia, should be brought prominently forward and dwelt upon as it had been by the counsel's learned friend. There was, however, one direct allegation which ought to be immediately contradicted, though Mr. John Prior's counsel would dispose of it effectually. So far from Mr. John Prior being on bad terms with his father and family, Susie's counsel could furnish abundant testimony to the contrary, even after the unfounded charge had been made against the young man.

The maid-servant who had admitted Jack to the Bank House on the night of his arrival in England was recalled to prove that his visit had been wholly unexpected by her mistress. No preparations had been made for it. Mrs. Lambert Crabtree was taken by surprise when she found her brother in her drawing-room.

There was a general feeling, increasing in significance and weight, that the less that was said of Mr. Lambert Crabtree the better for him and everybody connected with him. But his wife's counsel condescended to produce contradictory evidence of Newtonians who, according to their own account, had been parading the streets of their native town early on the morning succeeding the volunteer ball.

They had seen no mysterious man lurking in the shade of the trees, opposite the Bank House, hours after Mr. Lambert Crabtree had quitted the drill hall. What had been said to the opposite effect was ridiculously slight and transparently delusive.

Yet neither was the fact lost sight of that even if the banker had been found implicated in the robbery, it did not follow that his wife was guilty. Nobody had seen Mrs. Crabtree break open the bank—one had only to look at her to be struck with the preposterousness of the accusation. True, some of the Bank of England notes taken from the safe were found stitched in the mattress of her bed, and the silk with which they were stitched corresponded with silk found in her work-basket. But that was at the best presumptive evidence. Mrs. Lambert Crabtree had, with the perfect candour of an innocent woman, volunteered the statement that she was absent from her room, having been startled by the real thieves

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during a portion of the night. Why might not the depredators have entered the bedroom during the lady's absence and made use of the silk from her work-basket which stood in the adjoining room? And after all, this was ignoring an obvious explanation of a suspicious coincidence—namely, the similarity of much of the silk in ordinary use.

After the first bold flight of imagination, it it was a much lower and tamer excursion of fancy to cite a more reasonable hypothesis in Mrs. Lambert Crabtree's favour. A considerable number of hours—a whole half day—had intervened, during which she had acted as most ladies in the trying circumstances would have done, she had gone with her children, in the absence of her husband, from the unpleasantness of the scene of the robbery, to her father's house at Redcot. It was not till then, after ample time had been given for many persons to have entered and quitted Mrs. Crabtree's bedroom unobserved, that at

the instance of the detectives from London the local police had made a rigorous search for the missing money, and recovered it in the manner described.

On the missing bonds, of which so much had been made in the theory of a sufficient motive for the crime, the counsel became almost supercilious. He declined to deal with what he protested was irrelevant matter, and would say nothing with regard to a line of argument which he considered from first to last supposititious. It was acknowledged by the prosecution that it was uncertain whether the bonds were or were not in the bank safe at the time of the robbery. Unless it could be shown that they were in the safe, which, of course, would have demolished the theory of a motive for the felony, he submitted that they ought not to have been brought into the case.

The counsel had been prepared to play a trump card by calling a witness sure to

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produce a sensation in the court. Had he been summoned the first day, he would have served to complete the family tableau, which had certainly occurred to Bennet Gray's mind. as an effective representation to set before the British public. But after the master of the ceremonies was conscious that the tide of public opinion had turned, and was running strongly for his client, he was so confident of getting her off that he risked relinquishing the advantage he could command. For reasons which could be easily understood and appreciated, he refrained from calling the child Piers Crabtree to give evidence to save his mother. The lawyer contented himself with reserving the child's figure for his speech alone. It was admitted that one of Mrs. Crabtree's children had slept in her room on the night of the robbery. Now, though the sleep of childhood was proverbially sound, was it conceivable that a sane woman, projecting a burglary, would have voluntarily provoked the additional

peril caused by the presence of a child? Was there a father or a mother present who could believe that, of her own choice, even the most desperate and degraded of women would commit a crime, and secrete the fruits of her dishonesty, close to the little bed on which her innocent, unconscious child lay sleeping?

Mrs. Lambert Crabtree's fine eyes swimming in tears protested emphatically against the unnatural inference.

But, indeed, cleverly-selected witnesses examined in a masterly manner, forensic eloquence, the Judge's summing up with a leaning to mercy's side, were so much valuable stock-in-trade thrown away to induce what was in the end a foregone conclusion. It was a singular item in the combination of causes which worked for Susie that even the hardhearted people who professed to see through a millstone, who, if they had believed in anybody, would have been inclined to believe rather in Jack than in his sister, who called

Lambert Crabtree's wife 'a devilish handsome little humbug,' were still unanimous on the advisability of not bringing her to book and of letting her off, were it only for her pluck and finished acting.

Jack Prior's counsel's opinion coincided with that of his professional brother, since Jack would stand or fall with his sister. It was idle to waste the time of the Court with a greater demonstration on young Prior's part than what was necessary in re-establishing his character as a well-liked, in the main trustworthy, fellow, not practically disowned by his father, and in reiterating the circumstances of his position and education, with the incredibility of his employing them in the abetting of a palpably violent and desperate crime. There remained nothing farther to do than to remind the jury that the sole evidence against John Prior, younger, of Redcot, consisted of the small items that he happened to have slept at the Bank House—his sister's house—the night

before and the night or morning of the robbery, that he had left betimes the same morning, and that the missing keys of the hall door and the door of communication with the bank, supposed to have been secured by the burglars, were found under the frame of the looking-glass in his bedroom, where other hands than his might have put them. The jury brought in a unanimous verdict of 'Not Guilty,' and the court received it with loud applause, which could not be suppressed.

Again the Court House and its crowd seemed to rock and sway round Bennet Gray, but she was still able to meet and return one eager, half-incredulous look of relief and thankfulness from Jack as he left the dock with very much the same air that he had worn when he entered it, though people were now pressing round him to congratulate him. Miss Hopkins was not among them - she did not like her verdict to be upset. She continued to reflect grudgingly in the distance that she was still

sure the young scamp, who had not his unprepossessing face for nothing, had something to do with the robbery. His poor dear sister had known of his complicity, and been punished for the knowledge. He ought not to get off so easily, but it was the way with men—they always favoured each other; they never failed to have the best of it. Miss Hopkins's temper was thrown off its balance by Jack's unwarrantable release.

In spite of Miss Hopkins's hostile judgment, Jack retired, holding his head as high as his stature would admit of, while his nostrils were inflated and contracted spasmodically at intervals—an attitude and an action which said, 'I am where I ought never to have been, and, having been brought here, I don't think I shall ever forget it.'

But as for Susie—the true heroine of the occasion—she withdrew in the midst of her throng of satellites, in a sort of subdued triumph. When one came to think over

everything, it was slightly incongruous in the wife of a bankrupt banker, a deserter from his post, a fugitive who dared not meet the charges that might be brought against him.

Susie still maintained the character of that sweetest of popular heroines—a confiding, illused woman, betrayed by her very tenderness, and by the conflicting duties which she had owed to an unworthy husband on the one hand and to society and the laws of her country on the other—Susie could not be said to recognise a tribunal higher than that of human authority. She promptly elected, without waiting for an invitation, to go with her brother and Miss Gray to Redcot. Mrs. Lambert Crabtree would not repair, even for a few minutes, to the Bank House, Newton—not to fetch away the children she had insisted on keeping with her. She became all at once and for the time indifferent to their company, telling Mat Crabtree that he might either take them with him to Haybridge, where she declined to accompany him, or send

them over to her at Redcot, as he thought fit. She mortified Miss Hopkins by refusing alike her condolence and her congratulations civilly—it was very difficult for Susie to be uncivil—but with decision.

All the way to Redcot Susie sought to usurp the attention of her companions, bewailing her maiden days and pleading the pathetic palliations of such misbehaviour as she had been betrayed into. 'Who would have thought it?' she asked wistfully. 'I was such a happy, envied girl—to come to what I have just barely escaped from. Oh! Miss Gray, no girl is so well off and so much thought of as to be entirely beyond the reach of danger. She should be so careful, so guarded in her choice! What can a poor wife do? You cannot tell her feelings. I am not going to blame my poor, unhappy husband—he was always good to me, in one sense, but, oh! what can a wife and mother do?'

Bennet did not answer, she did not even hear the question. She was content to sit in the dusk of another summer evening with her hand clasped in Jack Prior's, and let tears of infinite gratitude course down her cheeks, because his deliverance from a miserable fate was compassed, because they were not to be separated till death—nay, please God, death itself should not long sunder them.

When the party arrived at Redcot Susie seemed to awake to some deeper consciousness and to a shade of genuine feeling. She shrank from meeting her father and Jane. She shook herself free from the others, forbidding them with a certain peevish impatience to follow her. 'I don't want you. I cannot bear any more to-night. How can you expect it? I only want mam-ma. Nobody's to come near me except mam-ma.'

Mrs. Prior responded to the imperious,

selfish call. She only stayed to kiss her son, to see his father grasp his hand, then went to shut herself up for the night with her prodigal, to listen sadly to her hollow confidences, to comply patiently with her fantastic caprices.

CHAPTER XI.

JACK PRIOR DOES SOMETHING TO REDEEM HIS REPUTATION.

The summer was barely over. The filberts in Redcot quarry were still green to the very fringes of their husks—only the earlier varieties of the apples in the orchard were yellow. The berries in the shrubbery had as yet little chance against the flowers in the garden. The purple of the barberry, the rich black of the elder, the coral red of the mountain ash were still nodding to the golden sunflowers, the African marigolds—brown and yellow like bees' coats, the flame colour of the gladioli, the great white heads of the giant phlox. The later roses—paler for the most part, and fainter in fragrance contrasted with their earlier, more

splendidly endowed sisters—had never been in greater profusion.

But many strange experiences had come and gone before Jack Prior and Bennet Gray were at last walking together, unchallenged and unforbidden, as they had not always dared to picture themselves, among the old-fashioned labyrinths of the Redcot grounds, and by the silent mill and the empty barn, which had been as good as Robinson Crusoe's island to Jack when he was a boy. Of all things the man and woman were quarrelling—at least, so it sounded.

'I will not have you speak so to me, Jack. I will not listen to another word. As if I could have done less! as if it had not been my pride and consolation to do it! as if I and all I have were not yours! It is horrid to have you so much as thanking me.'

'I think I know in a way what you mean,' said Jack, with a short laugh to hide another feeling. 'It is like the governor's being so

elaborately civil to me. If he would only go at my failures and deficiencies as he used to do, and not act as if he were sorry, and seeking to make up for what has happened, it would be a comfort. I can't stand his consulting me about the pits, and wishing me to look into the leases, and seeking to make me feel like his son and heir. I could find it in my heart to ask him to let me alone.'

'No, you mustn't,' said Bennet quickly.
'Think what pleasure it gives your mother to see you and your father as son and father should be; how the recognition of your claims, to the unsaying of his own words, binds him to her more closely than when they were bride and bridegroom.'

'I am not worthy of it,' said Jack, with a sorrowful shrug; 'though I have had some hard lines dealt to me. If I had been what I ought they would never have touched me. I know that, and other people know it as well, and we'll none of us get over it. I wish I had

remained in Australia. You may say what you like in your kindness and generosity—it is a case of give a dog an ill name and hang him. The only question is whether you are to be condemned with the dog that has been justly regarded as an idle ne'er-do-well till he has been branded with an accusation of theft.'

'My dear Jack, you proposed to take me for better for worse, at least I thought so—I hope so, and I did the same by you. As we cannot undo it, there is no more to be said. As for this wretched, absurdly false mistake and its consequences, assuredly you will live them down. You do not mean that you are such a faithless pessimist as to tell me that there can be a scandal or slander which a brave and honest man cannot live down?'

Before he could answer her they were interrupted. A messenger from the house coming up the avenue had caught sight of Jack's figure, and in the man's haste and excitement turned aside to address the young

squire. It was a collier from Kershaw, in his pit dress, to the lamp burning like a red spark in his cap in the broad day. The miner was going to his shift, and not returning from it, for his face, hands, and arms—colourless like the flowers, leaves, and stalks of a plant grown in a dark cellar—were clean and not grimy. It was a lank young face—long at all times with premature personal care, longer than usual with public trouble—the dire distress of a community. It was the face of Joe Jones, and the blinking eyes were fixed upon Jack Prior with an imperative, agonised summons. 'Māāster Jack, there's been an explosion in the pits.'

'An explosion! Good heavens!' cried Jack, instinctively freeing his arm gently but firmly from Bennet's clasp, as she stood arrested and trembling by his side. 'Where, Joe, where? Has my father been told?'

'In t' Young Squire's workings, as was named the day you was born. It was where I took you down, and you made me come

bound, if there ever came another explosion like that in '63, I would fetch you straight. There have come another explosion, and I'm here. It is like Māāster Willet has sent word to squire, or will send soon, but 'tis no business o' mine.'

'Oh, Joe, are there men in the workings?' Bennet found voice to ask. 'Will it be possible to save them?' And she thought of the women belonging to these men, whose lots might be so different from what she had held hers to be only this morning.

'Nine lads, schoolmistress, as near as we could reckon in the hurry. You must haste ye, Māāster Jack, for there be nine sure and certain, living or dead, as had gone down not a quarter of an hour before, for the next shift. There be nine among the gas and the fire—for mebbe the pit is on fire; there is smoke enow, and the roadway stopped for a wager. I should have been among them, but my little wench, as you knowed, schoolmistress'—Joe

wandered into a personal digression—'has chincough bad, and I were up with her in the night, and had to go round by the Long Row to send Joan Short to her. I heerd the roar of the explosion between the Row and the pit-mouth. I had heerd tell last night, Māāster Jack, that you were safe at Redcot again, as we all knowed you would be, and I ha' kep' my word, running the most of the road, though my wind is none so good, from Kershaw. You mun run too, Māāster Jack you're a rare good hand at the runnin', as none can beat you at cricket—and it's for nine men's lives you're runnin', do you hear, if you're to go down in the room o' Bailiff as is gone to Droitwich to attend his darter's funeral. You have the right before Māāster Willet's son; and I'm set on being in the batch, for I would not have the lads think as were in the same shift wi' me that I ha' done nowt for them.'

'No, Joe, that would never do,' said Jack

incoherently. 'Run on to the house and see that my father is told at once. He will order what is necessary to be sent and come over himself immediately. I'm off, and you'll follow me; and if you can catch me up we'll go down together. Bennet,' he turned to her for an instant, with all his heart in his voice, 'you will not seek to stop me? You hear him? Nine lives; and if I can help to save one, nothing else signifies much.'

'Yes, Jack, go,' said Bennet, with trembling lips; and he did not wait to hear her speak further faltering words, of soldiers' wives who send their husbands into the battle to take lives, and should she keep him from saving them? Only he would let her follow him as far as she could. She could not fight foul air and fire and falling rocks; but she could be near, as she had been in the court, to be the first to hear the best or the worst, to watch with those who were in similar trouble, though their sun had not gone down at noon.

Already Jack was plying the active legs which had won him such credit at cricket and football, forgetting all the tribulation and disgrace of these last doleful weeks, feeling a man again in the front rank of his fellows.

John Prior, who was not without experience in such a terrible casualty as may occur any day in a coalfield, was ready to start on the instant with all the appliances that could be wanted. When he heard that his son had gone before him fresh colour came into his cheek, and he reared his grey head and walked more erect and firmly than he had walked for many a day. He did not object to being accompanied by Bennet and Jane, particularly as Mrs. Prior, still shut up with Susie, had not heard what had happened, and it was judged best to spare her the knowledge till the danger was over, the speakers said softly, with bated breath.

The bleak, blighted, ash-strewn moor was as Bennet had pictured it would look on the occasion of one of the periodical tragedies of the mine. The machinery had been standing in lifeless stillness and dumb protest after the accident, but had been hastily repaired to admit of relays of men going down to learn the extent of the injury, and to seek to rescue the sufferers. A detachment had descended the pit under Mr. Willet before Jack Prior could arrive. He had headed another company after he had been overtaken by Joe Jones, which had followed the first down the shaft before Mr. Prior and the girls came on the ground.

Bennet and Jane were far from the only women present. Youth and age were alike represented. The old-fashioned little lass who had been accustomed to carry 'father's meals' to the pit-mouth with one hand and to lug about a baby on the other arm, was there; so was the feeble grandmother, who rarely stirred from the warmest seat in the chimney corner, unless to go to church on the finest Sunday of the year. Widow Maxey had instinctively yoked

her venerable horse into her cart, resumed her carter's whip, and was seated in her place of office once more. There might be other loads than coals to cart that day, and who so fit to drive them as she, who had been about Kershaw Colliery for a good score and a half of years — who had done service on the memorable day in '63? Every woman who was not absolutely bed-ridden had run out; whether her men folk were in the pit or out of it, she knew they would soon be in the thick of the fray at the ominous sound. They all knew it by report, if not by personal experience, and had trodden with wild, feeble feet, jostling each other, the familiar paths from the Rows to the particular pit. The first frantic rush had died out with the smoke and dust of the catastrophe. But straggling parties of people from neighbouring villages and towns continued to hurry across the moor, brought by interest and curiosity to the spot.

It was understood by those who had

sufficient knowledge to form an opinion from the signs above ground that the disaster was not so bad as that of '63. The damage done to the machinery had not been great. It could be repaired in a temporary manner without loss of time. Some parts of the roof had fallen, but, it was hoped, not where the men in the pit had been at work, and not to such an extent as to offer an insuperable barrier to reaching them in time. The great dread, after the kindling of the fire-damp, was the letting loose of the choke-damp and the closing up of the air-passages.

There was no loud lamentation, doing despite to the blue sky that lies behind even the smokiest pall which shrouds 'a black country,' to the dense air, still mellow in its moorland sharpness with the recent breath of summer. There was a hush of quivering expectation, women banding together with linked arms and bowed heads, men exchanging meaning looks and muttered words after

peering keenly into the yawning hole in which every hope and fear were for the moment centred.

The eagerly waited for signal from below to pull up the cage broke the effort at endurance; but in answer to the many heart-throbs as of one heart, and the sudden push forward of the throng of people, the police who had arrived and the pit-head men kept order, and caused all but those actually employed to stand back. The women especially, with Bennet and Jane among them, were forced to give the pit a wide berth, for none of those above ground knew what might meet their hungry eyes when the first explorers returned with their freight and their tale.

The busy group in front closed in round the pit and obscured the view to those at a little distance, so that they could not catch a glimpse of who or what had returned to the upper world. Then the tidings were circulated that it was Mr. Willet and a collier who had been down with him, and that they brought up between them one of the men who had been in the pit at the time of the accident. The pit was not on fire, but the fall of the roof had been greater than was at first supposed, and the air was bad. The searchers had got far enough to extricate this man, who had been working nearest the roadway, and were going on with their efforts to rescue the other men. But it had been necessary for Mr. Willet, who had become affected by the foul air to which he had been exposed for some time, to come up, while young Mr. Prior had taken his place.

The news was as good as all save the most sanguine had anticipated. 'Good news,' Bennet Gray kept repeating to Jane, unaware that her eyes were glistening and her fingers twitching like those of some of the women who had husbands and sons in the living grave. These women were entering into a shrill contention as to which of their men worked

nearest the roadway. 'It were my māāster, I tell you.' 'No, it were my lad Bill, I'm sure on it; I is, were over-confident assertions. The dispute was ended by the spectacle of the rescued man staggering past. He was not too badly hurt to prevent his walking with a little assistance, but he was a sufficiently sorry sight, ghastly in his dirt, and dabbled with the blood flowing from a wound in his neck, tied up roughly with his cotton handkerchief, which turned him sick and giddy. He was still able to call to his wife, struggling to get to him, 'Ay, it's me, lass, leastways it's all that's left on me.' No woman could dispute her claim any longer, though half-a-dozen there would have given the most precious things they possessed to have had their men stand in her man's shoes. 'Ay, it's Luke Cocks and no mistake. Poor chap, it's like he's sorer floored than he lets on, and her within sight and hearing. He'll not get over a gash like thatten the day nor the morn neither.'

Another interval as silent, as oppressive, for there had been considerable re-assurance in Mr. Willet's announcement and in Luke Cocks' having been brought out alive and fit to stand on his 'pins,' in the current phrase. The re-assurance was damped, especially to those unaccustomed to such scenes, by the condition of the next victim recovered from the mass of ruins and the stifling fumes rising from old wastes and abandoned workings. He was reduced to something carried past on a shutter, with a sheet hastily thrown over it. Bennet and Jane drew away, clenching their hands in horror, while the other women strove desperately to reach the bearers, to discover who was their burden, and if it was all over with him. The load was put down for fresh inspection by a doctor, and was not immediately taken up again. Some stir and commotion followed among the waiting assistants, a brandy flask was in the doctor's hands; 'He ain't dead' was shouted in a species of exultation. 'Doctor

says he be coming round, and may get over it.' Bennet and Jane drew long gasping breaths, and turned and kissed each other impulsively. A few minutes afterwards one of their old pupils at the club-room was so carried out of himself as to hail them and give them the information which concerned them. The hurt man was Ben Ashe, and he would have been clean gone if Noah King, that hauled him to the pit-eye, had not treated him as 'gin he were a drownded man,' after the directions in the ladies' lectures.

Bennet thanked the lad gratefully for his communication, but Jane broke into sobs.

Bennet recognised little Nancy Jones, as she executed the long whoops of her cough in the arms of a middle-aged woman, whose heart was in the pit with her two nephews still unaccounted for there. Bennet, whose own heart was in the pit, proposed to relieve the woman for a space. And the ice which had been gathering and settling in the girl's breast, like a heavy

weight at her heart, checking its flow of blood, melted for an instant when 'the little wench' responded to her former nurse's greeting. 'Your father is where Jack is,' Bennet whispered to the unconscious child. 'They are facing life and death together for their brothers. That should make you and me good friends, Nancy.'

'Da-da, da-da, la-dy, la-dy,' babbled the child.

But Jack and Joe Jones were parted. Joe had been overcome by the insidious afterdamp, and Jack had ordered him up to the fresh air, refusing to return with him, though the remaining seven men had been found huddled together, all of them alive, and none so seriously hurt as Ben Ashe. There was word of a lad who had not been come upon. He had not been reckoned among the older lads and men, and formed the tenth life in the lot. Jack and two of the volunteers in the work stayed behind to make a last search for this boy.

'But don't take on about young māāster, schoolmistress,' said Joe, with his blue lips, when he was so far better as to come to Bennet, which he did straightway. He had wit to read what was before his eyes, and was not troubled by any ceremonious necessity for polite fictions. 'I ha' got a mouthful of pure air, and my bellows is in working order again. I'm going down right off—at oncet. It were I led him into the dance, and God A'mighty will let me bring him back to you—not a hair of his head the worser, for your goodness to the motherless wench.'

After that Bennet wandered restlessly to Mr. Prior, and stole one of her hands into his. He wrung her hand, and continued to hold it, saying nothing.

Joe was gone for not longer than ten more terrible minutes before the signal vibrated anew. The first cage that came up held Jack with what was not black of the skin of his face and hands as blue as Joe's lips had been, Joe, and a flibbertigibbet of a boy, who looked the least touched of anybody, for the very young and the very old will breathe with comparative impunity an atmosphere fatal to mature men. And this young gentleman was only cowed by various reflections. He had been in the pit out of order. The underground bailiff, when he returned from the funeral of his daughter, Mr. Willet—nay, the squire himself—might all have something to say to the youngster for his defiance of regulations. Finally, if he did not get one of the 'hidings' to which he was well accustomed from the authors of his being, who had only within the last hour begun to guess that their son was in a scrape as usual, he would have richly deserved it.

When Jack's face, with a diabolic tint added to its grotesque plainness, rose above the lining of the pit, and it was seen that he had brought with him the last waif of the explosion, a cheer suddenly burst from the men around.

Bennet heard it, John Prior heard it, and

it sounded still more ravishingly sweet to them than to him, whom still it soothed. It rung with a far-away murmur of 'well done,' in ears yet humming with the drowsy influence of the poisoned air of the pit, yet echoing with the bald 'Not Guilty' of the court.

As for Mrs. Prior, when the applause was retailed to her, it seemed never to cease, but to go on in a perpetual proud proclamation which announced her to be the mother of a brave and generous man.

During his watch by the pit-mouth, John Prior had made every arrangement which a considerate and humane coal-owner could accomplish for the relief of the injured men, and the assistance of the other colliers who would be subjected to enforced idleness for several weeks by the accident.

These arrangements had become known in the interval, and, following on the heels of the cheer for Jack, rose a cheer for the squire of Redcot and his lady, who had always been

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good friends to the mining community at Kershaw. A still more expansive soul rounded off the plaudits with the proposal of a cheer for 'Miss and schoolmistress,' on which John Prior made an abrupt amendment in the excitement of the moment. 'Not schoolmistress, my men, the future wife of the young squire, the future mistress of Redcot,' and pulling off his hat he led lustily the last 'hurrah!'

CHAPTER XII.

MOLLY AND PIERS CRABTREE'S GUARDIANS, BY NATURE AND BY ASSUMPTION.

When Susie descended from the fastness in which she had detained her mother, not a reproachful word was said to her. She was not likely to take to herself a change not alluded to which had been made in the house. 'Indeed,' she exclaimed nonchalantly, when she found that the picture of the arch-traitor had been removed from the staircase. It was sufficiently shown otherwise that silence and oblivion were to fall on the episode of the bank robbery; and it was devoutly to be desired that Susie's plaintive jeremiad on her wasted youth and beauty, and on the trials of a too devoted wife, might come to an end as speedily as possible. Perhaps,

as it belonged to Susie's character to utter this jeremiad, the treatment was trying. Certainly it did not elicit any overpowering expression of gratitude. Susie was equally irresponsive to the knowledge that there was still a home for her and her children at Redcot; that neither her father in his repugnance, no, nor Jack, though he too shrank unconquerably from her -all the more that she gave no sign of shrinking from him-would turn her from their doors till another refuge was found for her. Susie took it as her inalienable right that she should be in the home she had outraged and threatened to render desolate—not only in the most comfortable chair, which she quickly appropriated, but in the place of honour, which she was ready audaciously to fill. In the same manner she would unhesitatingly have called upon her mother to resume the chief of her motherly cares for her—Susie, to be the slave of her whims if she chose. But John Prior interfered and peremptorily forbade the impudent extortion, however gracefully made. Mrs. Prior, on her part, though she had wonderful patience and forbearance, ay, and tears of pity, which were like drops of blood wrung from her heart, where her erring daughter was concerned, rose up after the first few days, in what was not so much self-defence as an honest maintenance of what was right and fit, a strong sense of what was due to her husband and her remaining children.

Susie did not scruple to be mildly indignant, and to complain piteously to all who would listen to her, that even mam-ma had gone against her.

Then Mrs. Lambert Crabtree condescended to make overtures on terms of equality to the late Redcot governess, about whom the cockand-bull story that she was an heiress in disguise had actually turned out to be true. In addition, she had been eminently successful in her aims, though she was not to be the mistress of Haybridge. Miss Gray had the credit of

subduing pap-pa with her bow and spear, though when it came to that, not many elderly gentlemen were wholly inaccessible to the charms of heiresses—open or disguised—as wives for their sons and heirs! Pap-pa had chosen to announce, in the most gushing manner, at a gathering of the colliers—of all people, after an explosion of all things, that Miss Gray was to be the future mistress of Redcot. Of course, when pap-pa had gone so far as to say that in public, even though it was a public of colliers, the family could only submit-nothing more was to be done. But Bennet, though she could not trample on a creature who was down, was inflexibly civil; no more.

From Jane there was nothing to be had save cold magnanimity. No amount of mischief-making, however ingeniously prosecuted, would render the large-minded, large-hearted woman jealous of Jack and his coming wife.

So many of Susie's vocations were gone already, it was still harder for her to discern

that, in spite of her former social sway, and notwithstanding the éclat with which, as it seemed to her, her trial had ended, the county neighbours of the Crabtrees and Priors manifestly fought shy of her—a wife with a cloud upon her, living apart from a disreputable husband, a pensioner on the bounty of her father. Poor old John Prior! he had been sorely tried, though this windfall of a moneyed wife, a charming, handsome, monstrously clever young lady, had turned up in the most romantic manner, in time to redeem the scapegrace Jack's chances. But as for Susie Crabtree, however cruelly she had been treated, however much she was to be felt for and lamented, with her memory tenderly cherished, as in her day the loveliest, brightest, most pleasant spoken of young matrons unequally voked to a brute of a husband—she was still a woman who had only escaped by the skin of her teeth from conviction in a public trial for a bank robbery. She was no fit associate for the men's

wives and daughters, however captivating and entertaining she might still be in casual encounters with the men themselves. Susie was to have no more good times of pre-eminence in popularity, unless she was prepared to angle for them on another and very different moral level, which could not be while she stayed at Redcot.

Susie began to droop, and to afford indications of becoming an interesting invalid, and so further burdening her relatives and trading on the sympathies of the world.

Mat Crabtree strove manfully to accommodate himself to the checks put on his former liberality in farming enterprise and scholarly tastes by the mortgages with which Haybridge was now burdened. If they were to be wiped out in his day, they could only be got rid of by all-round retrenchment and strict economy. Nevertheless he proposed again, as he had proposed at the beginning, to take his brother's wife's children to stay for the present at Hay-

bridge. But Susie knew better than to imagine that Haybridge under existing circumstances could be preferable to Redcot.

At this juncture letters came from Lambert Crabtree, who had gone, from easily understood reasons, to Sweden, where a former acquaintance of his had settled and prospered. Lambert had found an opening through this acquaintance, and by Mat's consenting to stint himself, in order to give his brother another start in life. Lambert was as ready to brag as ever of what were likely to be the profits of the new concern, and of the progress he had already made in winning the good graces of the leaders of Upsala society. All at once Susie was seized with an ardent longing to be with her husband. A wife's place was by her husband's side whatever his faults might have been, and she would say this for her poor dear old Lamb, that he had thought nothing too good for her, and would have liked her to eat out of gold plate and wear gold tissue if she had cared to do it.

He would be amazed and indignant to hear how cavalierly she was treated now by her own people among others, she was sorry to say, though they might have felt for her if anybody could feel. A true wife did not mind sharing the reverses and hardships in her husband's lot. Banishment, privation! What did she care for banishment and privation if she could but be by her poor Lamb and prove a comfort to him? She supposed she would not die of the cold of Scandinavia. If she did, what did it signify when she was in the path of duty—a wife's duty? The loss would be Lamb's, for since their misfortunes nobody wanted her at home.

It was pointed out to Mrs. Lambert Crabtree that she could not with prudence take her children to Sweden till it was seen whether their father would succeed and whether he could provide a permanent home for her and them.

Here she was quite amenable to reason. It

would be too great a risk and far too much responsibility and fatigue for her to venture to carry the darling babies abroad with her. They at least would be safe enough with their grand-parents and uncles and aunts-there was no lack of relations. The children were too young to be deeply wounded by the unkindness which had cut her to the heart-and she did not mean to say that mam-ma and Jane, not to say pap-pa and Jack and Mat, or even Miss Gray, would be guilty of inhumanity to their own near kindred in the shape of dear, innocent, helpless children. To part from Molly and Piers—ah! it would be bitterly hard—none save a mother knew how hard, but a wife's duty came even before a mother's, and she would give both of the babies for Lamb

As Lambert Crabtree acquiesced in his wife's wish to join him, Susie, after shedding a few becoming tears over the children, went her way from Redcot and England. No sooner

was she fairly gone than her family, in company with the whole neighbourhood, were keenly sensible what an incubus had been lifted from their shoulders. Susie might repent; it were hard to deny her that half-divine capacity of sinners which is the hope of humanity; but it could scarcely have been among the kindred whom she still in her heart scorned with a light hardened scorn, upon whom she would have continued to trade with self-satisfied assurance.

Poor little Molly and Piers were left, and were likely to be left, unless they could be found of service to their parents, to the custody of other, and, it was to be hoped, more disinterested and trustworthy keepers.

Mat Crabtree, coming upon their Aunt Jane with Piers in her lap and Molly at her knee, listening to their lessons, and striving to be of use to the unlucky wights, thought he had never seen Jane Prior to greater advantage. He longed not only to tell her so, but to share

her task and lighten it by sharing it, for were not the boy and girl his nephew and niece as well as hers, Crabtrees still more than Priors? 'I must have the children to Haybridge, Jane,' he said, as he sent them to play out of hearing. 'There can be no question about that being their proper home. They have more claim upon me than upon anyone here, and I am willing enough to acknowledge the claim. A little lad and lass, growing up in the house of a solitary man, should be a boon to him, shouldn't they? Anyhow, your father and mother ought not to be troubled with the children any longer. The little Woods are enough for a nursery of a previous generation.'

'I don't think Molly and Piers bore my father and mother, Mr. Crabtreee,' said Jane, growing a shade paler, 'and I'm sure they do not bore me. I seem to have learnt experience with Ally and Sam and Tom, or Miss Gray has opened my eyes on some points,' she went on with a faint smile, 'for I get on better with

Molly and Piers, now that they are my particular charge. I am really fond of them,' her eyes filling with tears, which she hastily turned her head aside to twinkle away. 'Indeed, they are not at all bad children, though they are rather slow and a little unruly. They are affectionate, and I think,' she added, stammering, and her face getting very red, 'I think they are truthful and honest.'

'I hope so,' he answered, with quick, grave emphasis. 'I did not mean to condemn the mites—tolerably big mites for their years, ain't they? Ah! they take the size and, I daresay, the slowness and unruliness from the Crabtree side of the house, so that I am still more bound to bear what I can of the burden. Your father and mother and you ought not to be left with a house full of grandchildren. Your father told me Jack was looking at Moor Park for himself and Mrs. Jack. Is that settled?'

'No,' said Jane, with another little lurking smile. 'On second thoughts the plan was

given up. They are to stay here. Nobody liked to part my mother and Miss Grav-Bennet least of all. You know they were sworn allies from the first, and they have renewed the old bond. Bennet is my mother's right hand, and she is wanted to keep Jack straight with my father. These two will not drift far apart again, I trust; but an interpreter rather than a peace-maker is still needed between them sometimes. My father has a great respect for Bennet's opinion, and is inclined to think more of Jack's when the two are in unison'

'All the more reason you should not be cumbered with my nephew and niece, while I dwell in solitary state at Haybridge.'

'Certainly, Mr. Crabtree, you are the best entitled to the children.'

'My dear Jane, you don't imagine that I covet the monkeys on my own account,' protested Mat Crabtree ruefully. 'A fine life they will lead me! I shall not have much

peace left me. I know they will miss you dreadfully, and that all the good training you have been giving them for the last month or two will soon be lost.'

'I daresay,' said Jane shyly, 'your housekeeper will be able to manage Molly and Piers.'

'Not at all,' he said, shaking his head.
'My housekeeper has given in her leave. That state to which I have alluded has got too sorry for her taste, latterly. Well, I don't blame her. She has been a faithful servant, but she does not like changes, naturally. She is getting up in years, she has saved money, and she wishes to join a sister who is about to start a lodging-house at Bournemouth. It is all perfectly fair and reasonable, though I may be put about to begin with, getting used to new ways and new servants.'

'Then why don't you leave the children where they are, at least in the meantime, if that will be any relief to you?' urged Jane.

'Because I think I see a better way if it were not too inconsiderate, too one-sided and full of effrontery.' He got up from his seat cpposite to her, and came and stood beside her, looking down at her. 'I am no longer young. I have lost sufficient money to keep me pinched in my resources, though I believe I can right myself if the time is granted to me. There is no use in saying what I might have done if all this trouble had not come upon us, particularly as even without it the Priors might well have had enough of the Crabtrees.'

Jane was silent for a moment, and even after she spoke with strong feeling she could not look at him.

'It might be put the other way—that the Crabtrees have had enough of the Priors,' she said in a low tone, her eyes cast down in mortification and shame, even while she trembled with a very different feeling.

'No; a thousand times no, so far as I am concerned,' said Mat stoutly, taking her hand.

'But do you mean to say, Janie, that you, with your powers and opportunities, which are likely to be greatly enlarged in the future, would not grudge to devote yourself to a middle-aged impoverished man and a couple of children whom his brother's misdoing had thrown upon you?'

'It was my sister's misdoing as well as your brother's,' said Jane frankly, 'but apart from that I would grudge nothing to the middle-aged man. I would count it a joy and honour to serve him.'

'Ah! that is kind,' he said, stooping and kissing her as if he were unable to resist the action. 'But it is because you are unpractical. I suppose learned ladies are more and not less unpractical than other women—in some senses they can afford it better. But what will your father and mother say?'

'I know both my father and mother and Jack and Miss Gray and everybody I care for —everybody worth listening to—will say neither they nor I can ever have enough of Mat Crabtree.'

So Jane carried her learning to meet and mingle with more learning at Haybridge, and to develop into sounder, more fruitful scholarship under her old critic's roof. Molly and Piers found greater room and better soil to afford them the necessary conditions for straight and upward growth than they could ever have commanded at the Bank House, in spite of the fact that a little Mat Crabtree appeared on the scene and deprived Piers of the most distant prospect of succeeding to the old acres. The event gave Piers, what was worth far more to him, the elder brother's sense of a half-fatherly right in care and tenderness for 'the little chap,' whom he had carried in his arms as a baby, for whom Molly had learnt to embroider wonderful small garments, and knit dainty socks and gloves. The bigger cousins, with an honourable, happy feeling of holding a trust for Uncle Mat and Aunt Jane, watched the smaller grow up through all the stages of babyhood and schoolboy life, till he attained their own level.

CHAPTER XIII.

WHAT CAME OF THE BORE AT THE RATS' DITCH.

JOHN PRIOR was standing in the Dutch cloverfield looking down at the Rats' Ditch. It had undergone a considerable transformation since the spring day when Lambert Crabtree had found his father-in law apparently contemplating the gambols of Tommy and Fly, as they plunged and struggled after imaginary rats in their happy hunting ground.

It was autumn—the second autumn—and there was the usual October wealth of withering sedges and bulrushes. Occasionally a single tuft of the blue flower of the chicory contrasted with a double row of the red berries of lords-and-ladies. These again were but dull crimson

reflections of the purer scarlet of the big berries of the bryony; its leaves were already russet and shrunken, festooning the hedges, and blending inextricably with the long green garlands and downy white seed of old-man's-beard.

There were greater alterations than those made by the annual round of the seasons. The borers had been here at last. They were not at work, for they had done their task, but their gear—windlass, ropes, rods—still stood or lay about among the heaps of rubbish and the trampled down, dug into sides of the ditch.

John Prior had a perfect right to stand there. He was under no inducement to make a feint of being drawn aside by his four-footed companion. For Ladslove had been bought with Bennet Prior's money, and was her property, to be united with Redcot as the inheritance of John Prior's grandchildren.

It was by John Prior's orders, and under his personal supervision, that the dream of his life had been realised, and coal bored for on the spot where he had been assured that the buried diamonds lay waiting for their finder. Every indication of the strata had been attended to, every obligation fulfilled, and the result was—nothing.

After all his proofs and convictions, his sleepless dread, his sacrifices to the secret he held, his late grasp on the coveted possession; by some baffling counter-operation of the primeval forces which had been at work, some mocking freak of Nature in her irony, expectation, fear, remorse, the final attainment of his goal had all proved groundless, needless, and in vain. There was not an ounce of coal under the earth by the Rats' Ditch any more than in the other Ladslove meadows. It was only yesterday that John Prior had been driven to acquiesce in the fallacy of the belief which had coloured the greater part of his life, and moved the man to the centre of his being. He stood and gazed blankly at the blank before him as at the grave—the empty grave, for it

had never contained a body-of his visions, apprehensions, and reviving hopes. It was as if his loves and his hates had been alike wasted, as if one were to awake in another world and find that the chief desire and dread which had shaped the life of the past had been a mere chimera. As he stood and looked, the soft autumn day, full of the pensiveness of over-ripeness, the morbidezza dropping to decay, which precedes the chill of the fall, he was again interrupted, but it was by a gentler intruder on his meditations this time. Instead of Lambert Crabtree, swaggering on his vicious bay 'Roosian,' Bennet Prior came quietly walking along the field-path, followed by Tommy, picking his steps gingerly, for there had been a touch of hoar frost in the early morning, melted by the midday sun, and Tommy had as great an objection to wetting his paws unnecessarily as a cat feels to wetting hers.

Bennet put her arm softly within the arm of the man, who stood with his hands crossed behind him, and was silent for a moment before she began to speak with wistful persuasion. 'They are all gone except me. Jack has got his mother to let him drive her over with Mary Burton to see Jane. He thought she—the mother—would be the better for a drive. We were too late up last night,' Bennet confessed, with a look of happy content in place of penitence. 'It was all the fault of the new book and the last group in the quilt.'

'And why did you not go with the rest?' he inquired.

'I?' a little nervously; 'oh! I stayed behind because I wished to be with you, if you would let me.'

'Thanks, my dear,' he said, a little absently. 'Have you anything you wish to say to me?'

She stopped to take breath and to clasp his arm more tightly. 'Jack is afraid you are terribly disappointed, sir,' she began courageously; 'and of course it is a surprise—a shock—I suppose I must say a great disappointment.

But there is another resource—to "dig deeper" at Kershaw. Jack tells me, what no doubt you know very well, that this is the colliers' motto. He has got that bit of valuable information, along with a great deal more of their experience, since he took an active interest in the pits. You have been pleased that he should do so. You do not mind that he—that I should be able to help you in other ways, as we are glad and proud to do—that we should seek to furnish the money necessary to put the pits in better working order, when they will pay back every farthing laid out on them?"

'They will pay back in time,' he said; there can be no mistake here. The coal is known to be at a lower level, and fuel is not likely to go out of fashion, unless there be some extraordinary convulsion in the planetary system, when naturally most fashions will come to an end.' He finished with a slight shrug of his shoulders. 'But what about the purchase of Ladslove at a fancy

price, and all the fine plans based on it?' he struck in presently, with a nervous twitch of his long upper lip.

Why, there is not a word to be said against the purchase,' she assured him with cheerful confidence, opening her eyes wider at the bare idea. 'The farm is a most desirable addition to your property; and are not these nice fields good grazing land,' glancing round admiringly on the rather sodden meadows. 'Jack says it would have been a pity to convert them into a black country. Besides, it would have spoilt the view from Redcot Spinney; though, as we are colliers, I daresay we ought to be above, or beneath, caring for views. Then, without the purchase, you could never have known the truth—never have been freed from the fear of a successful rival here. You would have had no heart to go on sinking more money at Kershaw.'

'You are a good special pleader, child,' he said, patting her hand.

But she wanted to say more, only it was the most difficult of all to say. 'And if you had found coal here you would never have been quite able to forget what it had cost you, what you had been brought to believe—though nobody dared blame you—that you had been made to pay for it. You spoke of it once to me; don't you remember? On one of those miserable days. Forgive me, sir, for reminding you of them. The penalty would have lingered in your memory, on your conscience, and marred everything. It would have spoilt every success, and risen up afresh to embitter disaster as if it were a just retribu-I often thought of that. Father, you are not so vexed as Jack and the mother imagine? For their sakes and mine, you will not mind very much that you are spared all these arrières pensées? The smart of an unhealed wound in the background has been at once and for ever prevented. Now, you can have nothing in this light to accuse yourself of. Is not that alone an incalculable blessing?'

His answer was to put his bony fingers on the soft hand which held his arm, and ask her, with one of the rare unclouded smiles that lit up his grey, gaunt, hard-featured face like sunshine on the rugged uplands of Kershaw Moor, 'My dear, what do they say is the meaning of your name?'

'My name!' she repeated, looking at him in a puzzled way.

'Yes, your name. Don't they pretend it is a contraction for Benedicta—Blessed? There are women of whom it is counted the greatest honour to say that their children will rise up and call them blessed. Do you think it ought to be reckoned less praise when it is the father, and not the children, who from the bottom of his heart calls his good daughter blessed?'

THE END.









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